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MRS. TREGASKISS

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MRS. TREGASKISS

MRS. TREGASKISS

A NOVEL OF ANGLO-AUSTRALIAN LIFE

BY

MRS. CAMPBELL-PRAED

AUTHOR OF

OUTLAW AND LAWMAKER, CHRISTINA CHARD, ETC.

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MRS. TREGASKISS.

CHAPTER I.

COMING HOME.

CLARE TREGASKISS was coming home with her two children—a girl of six and a baby in arms. She had just arrived at the Cedar Hill Terminus on the new railway line "out West."

Why had they called it Cedar Hill? Thus she vaguely wondered as the train crawled toward the station, through a sandy plain in which there was neither hill nor sign of cedar tree visible. There seemed nothing between the great flat and the horizon, except a belt of gidia scrub, marking the course of a creek, or a straggling cluster of tall coolabah trees, or the shape of an incoming bullock dray showing grotesquely against the hot steely sky. The plain was a desolate thirsty expanse of burned up grass and withered shrubs of the prickly lignum vitæ, with here and there a stunted sandal-wood or brigalow tree, the sleepers of the railway cutting it in two straight lines, till they ended at a row of zinc sheds, beside which the train halted.

The sun beat pitilessly upon the corrugated roofs and walls of the sheds, which were something of the same colour as the sky; and the dust from the plain made a brownish-yellow haze above the flooring within them, where were piled bales of wool which had been brought down from up-country by drays, and were waiting transport to the coast, each compact heap having its own distinc-

tive brand or initial, to indicate the owner of the sheep station whence it had come. Outside the sheds lay rubbish left by the railway workers—mounds of caked soil, scattered logs and planks, slabs of zinc, lengths of rusty iron, and disused implements. Several goods waggons were drawn up at a siding, tarpaulin-covered, and loaded with bales of wool. The station master, in shirt sleeves, and a couple of grimy porters were waiting on the platform ; and a small crowd of rough, bearded men, mostly in moleskins and Crimean shirts, open at the breast, with one or two among them of the squatter order in thin alapaca coats, pressed forward to meet certain feminine arrivals, of whom several were, on the face of things, barmaids. None of these men had come to meet Mrs. Tregaskiss ; she discovered this fact in a rapid glance along the platform, and waited till the crowd had dispersed and the station was comparatively quiet. From outside the railway sheds came the sound of clanking yokes and chains, of cracking whips and bullock-drivers' oaths ; and as Mrs. Tregaskiss passed out, she saw an array of drays drawn up. Some were tilted and in process of unloading, others were having their beasts unyoked ; some had small tents erected on top of the wool bales, and carried the wives and families of the bullock-drivers, and more than one was followed by two or three goats to supply milk for the children ; others were just coming in from the bush—strange, lumbering, top-heavy masses drawn by teams of fifteen, twenty, and even twenty-four bullocks, with heads bent under the yoke, heaving flanks, lolling tongues, and streaming saliva making a viscous trail on the dusty road. Their drivers walked beside them, dust-caked, sunburned, knotty-looking fellows, beaded with perspiration, arms and chests bare, and with greasy hats and limp puggarees. They goaded on the tired animals, which turned and butted and gave weary bellows, with mighty lashings of the thick, thonged whip and much blasphemous shouting.

At the opening of the sheds Mrs. Tregaskiss again stood still for a minute or two, and looked to her right and to her left. She seemed to be searching for someone not to be found. There was a faint trace of apprehension in her wide-open brown eyes, and she breathed a little sigh, half impatient, half relieved, while her lips gave an involuntary twitch that weakened momentarily the steadfast curves of her finely modelled mouth. It was a curious mouth, with a patient, melancholy smile, and something fixed and inscrutable in its expression, which, combined with the sensitive lines at the corners and the quickly dilating nostrils above, suggested emotional forces hidden under a sedulous reserve.

She looked out on a dusty road bordered by zinc houses, with patches of brown grass, and here and there a parched gidia tree between the enclosures. The very vegetation gave an impression of thirst and glare. An hibiscus shrub, flaunting its red blossoms, was an offence to the eye, which found relief only in a green passion vine or native cucumber struggling up a bough-shade of withered branches. The zinc buildings threw out cruel diamond gleams. All the houses at Cedar Hill were of zinc—they had travelled up the line to each successive terminus, and as the line went westward, would be packed up and carried to the next township. There was a store, a zinc lock-up, a few dwelling huts, and all the rest of the buildings were public-houses. Fifteen, there were in all—each with its due complement of rowdies: bullock-drivers, fencers, shearers, stockmen, diggers, shepherds "on the burst," and the miscellaneous riff-raff which collects in a Northern township. An odd background for a lady, who somehow gave the idea that she had been born and brought up among all the subtleties of an Old World civilisation. To a certain extent this was the case, but as a matter of fact Clare Tregaskiss was quite familiar with Bush life in its roughest aspects. For ten years she had been the wife of a western

squatter, and with the exception of a winter in Sydney, and occasional visits to the coast township of Port Victoria, had lived all those years at Mount Wombo station, in the unsettled district of the Leura.

She was returning now from a three-months' stay at Port Victoria, during which time the birth of her second living child had taken place. In her absence the line had made a further stage ; and this was her first visit to Cedar Hill.

Of the fifteen public-houses there was one, standing opposite the railway sheds, which called itself the Terminus Hotel, and had a claim to distinction as being the only place in Cedar Hill where a lady might find respectable accommodation. The building was of zinc too, but its framework was of wood, and it had a double story and veranda, while two tall papaw apple trees in front and a weedy path of garden proclaimed that its site had once been occupied by a shepherd's shanty or a Chinaman's hut, and took away from it somewhat of the stigma of mushroom growth. A number of bushmen were smoking and drinking in the veranda, and several horses were hitched to posts outside the bar. Mrs. Tregaskiss turned to a black boy following her, and bade him carry her baggage across to the hotel. The baggage consisted mostly of leather saddle bags, arranged evidently with a view to transit by pack-horse, but there were, as well, a small flat portmanteau, a baby's bassinette sewn up in canvas, and sundry parcels, to be packed into the buggy with which her husband was to meet her here.

She held her eldest child by the hand, and a young half-caste girl, neatly dressed and wearing uncomfortable-looking new leather boots, came close behind, carrying the baby, who was crying fretfully. The boots, to which she was unaccustomed, hindered her from walking with her native freedom. Mrs. Tregaskiss cast back an occasional anxious glance at the half-caste and her burden. She felt that she ought perhaps to be carrying the baby herself ;

and yet, poor thing, it was pathetically evident, in spite of her self-contained calm and patient attention to the matter in hand, that the duties of nurse were not wholly congenial to her temperament, and that possibly the half-caste might manage the infant more dexterously than its mother.

One of the bullock-drivers coming along with his team suspended a volley of oaths to call out:

"My word! if that isn't the Kiddie! I'm blowed if she isn't a bigger beauty than she was before she went down. Eh, Miss Ning? Aren't you going to say, How de do, to Jo Ramm?"

The child piped out in a clear, unchildlike voice, which had a curious touch of the blacks' twang:

"Wow de do, Jo Ramm? I'se quite well, thank you. I'se not to be called 'Kiddie,' it's not 'spectful, but,"—graciously—"I'll 'low you because you is a bullock-driver. What for you scold your bullocks so bad? Ning not like you. Poor bullocks! I believe that fellow cobbon tired."

She stepped a pace forward as if she were going to pat one of the foremost beasts. It lifted his head and opened its great wet mouth in a bellow which did not at all affright Ning, for she kept her ground steadily, while Ramm prodded the animal with his whip and turned it toward its mate from which it had been straying. Ning was a queer elf-like creature, with a prominent forehead, a mass of curly dark hair, and beautiful serious brown eyes —her mother's eyes. The bullock-driver laughed loudly in delight.

"Bless her! She don't know what fear is, don't that Kiddie. Beg pardon, Mrs. Tregaskiss! but it comes natural, seeing it's what her daddy calls her. Oh, she's a rare pickaninny, is that one! And she haint forgot her blacks' lingo. You see, Miss Ning, he's a nasty, ill-tempered, contrary cuss, is that old bally worker, and takes a power of pitching into to make him go, or else stand still when he is wanted to. Yes, you do, you old—blessed

angel, you ! S'oo ! Wo up there ! I've got an emu's egg I've been keeping for you, Miss Ning, and I'll fetch it across when the swag's got down."

"Have you seen anything of Mr. Tregaskiss, Ramm ?" asked the lady. She had a very sweet rich voice, with the Australian plaintive note in it, and deeper inflections which belonged to no country, unless it be the kingdom of sorrow.

"Last I saw of Mr. Tregaskiss was at Brinda Plains a month ago, when there was a cattle muster going on, and all hands at work, and I was fetching rations from Ilgandah. I believe he is on the road behind, coming down to look out for you, ma'am. That's what I made out of Jemmy the Liar, when he passed me this morning with his mails. Shouldn't wonder if that's Jemmy coming in now. You bet he went round to Flood's Selection for a drink."

There was the sound of hoofs behind and Jemmy Rodd the mailman came clattering along on his raw-boned chestnut mare, and leading a flea-bitten gray on which were strapped his blanket and a pile of leather mail-bags. At sight of Mrs. Tregaskiss he pulled up.

"Good-day, Mrs. Tregaskiss ! Glad to see you back. Hope you are pretty well ?"

"Very well, thank you, Rodd. How do you and the mail get on ?"

"Oh, I keeps my contract time, ma'am—I keeps my contract time, in spite of the heads of the creeks coming down in a flood when it's as dry as blazes on the plains, and the old chestnut bucking out of her skin when you try to put her into water running over her saddle-flaps. Oh, she knows the Government regulations, that old mare, and she knows it aint in the Government contract to swim creeks above the flaps—no, not for all the complaints some bosses choose to lodge agin the mailman. But I should say he has made himself pretty cheap at the General Post Office, with his grumblings and his blowings about Brinda Plains, has Mr. Cusack."

"Oh, you know that's Jemmy the Liar's way, ma'am," put in Ramm, aside. "Mr. Cusack may be a blower,—I don't deny it,—but to my sartin knowledge he has lodged but one complaint, and that was when you went two days on the burst, Jemmy, at the Coffin Lid, and spoilt him a sale through the mail being late. As for the creeks coming down, they haint been down for over a year, bad luck for the country! and as for that old chestnut—the Leura Terror as you call her,"—and Ramm laughed derisively,—"why, she haint got a pig-jump in her, let alone a decent buck."

Jemmy the Liar was evidently accustomed to having doubts cast upon his veracity, for he bore the reproach with meekness. Mrs. Tregaskiss interposed, repeating her question to Ramm. "Had Rodd seen anything of Mr. Tregaskiss?"

"I passed him this morning camping out by The Grave, and in the devil of a fluster. Something started the buggy horses in the night, and they broke their hobbles and bolted clean away with one of the pack-horses. They're young uns, broken in since you went away, and spankers to go. Tommy George was after them on the other pack-horse, and Mr. Tregaskiss gave me a message for you that he hoped to be down to-night, and that you were to wait for him at Ruffey's."

"Oh, thank you, Rodd! I hope everything is going on well on the Leura?"

Rodd did not answer for a moment. Both the men were gazing at Mrs. Tregaskiss; her voice had a sort of fascination for them. They said it was like music, and Ramm told his wife there were times when it went to his heart. "Seems as if it didn't ought to belong to the bush, somehow—has a kind of tremble in it like bottled-up tears begun to fizz and wanting to be let out." That was how Ramm put it. Jemmy Rodd's verdict upon her long ago had been: "She is a real lady, and none of

your jumped-up sort—always ready and obliging with a nip when I brings in the mail-bag after a long day, and no nasty pride about her. *She* don't mind what she puts her hand to. I've seen her baking a batch of soda-bread in a camp oven, and boiling salt junk for travellers when there was no Chinaman in the kitchen, and the men belonging to the huts camping out."

"How's things doing on the Leura?" he repeated. "Water's pretty scarce, ma'am, and Cusack's sheep are dying, and he has put fresh hands on to the bores. There's talk of a strike among the shearers, and we have got a new boss at Darra-Darra. I think that's about all the news. Mount Wombo is looking fresher as to grass than most places, but, my word! the station seems that miserable without you, Mrs. Tregaskiss—it's just like home when my old woman is away. But Ah Fat has got the garden by the waterhole in first rate order. I expect you will be pleased to hear that."

"Yes, I am, indeed. You know how much I think of the garden, Rodd. Now, good-day! I am very much much obliged to you for bringing me the message. I must get over to the hotel. Good-day, Ramm! Miss Ning will be very delighted with the emu's egg; it was kind of you to save it for her."

"Good-day, Ramm!" echoed Ning, waving her disengaged hand. "Mind you are good, Ramm, and don't you say swear-words. Mummy doesn't like them. And, please, Ramm, be very kind to the poor tired bullocks."

The postman and the bullock-driver both burst into a half tender laugh as they watched the little party crossing to the hotel.

"She is a queer one, the pickaninny," said Rodd. "But she's got a taking way with her—like her mother. That's the new baby, I suppose. Its father hasn't set eyes on it yet."

"If I had been Tregaskiss, I'd have gone down to Port

Victoria to fetch my missus home," said Ramm, with emphasis.

"No, you wouldn't—not if you were Tregaskiss. He aint the sort to do lady's man to his missus—thinks she can look after herself. And so she can."

"And so she can," assented Ramm slowly, adding, after a pause, "*and* after other people."

"Meaning the boss. Well, I shouldn't wonder if he did want a bit of playing up to when he is in a scot. He has got a temper, has Tregaskiss. My oath! I've seen him at Wombo kicking up the devil of a row over nothing at all, and swearing at the men in a way that only a blamed fool would stand. But he seems fond of his missus, and he is not such a bad chap, taking him all round. What I have to say agin Tregaskiss," continued Rodd, putting on a judicial air, "is that it's not that he likes his own glass, and takes it. Lord, I don't blame him for that! But, hang it! a man that's free with the grog to himself should be free with it, in a general sort of way, to strangers. And there's no denying that Tregaskiss is a bit of a screw—a d——d sight worse screw than old Cyrus Chance, *I* say, though I know that's not the opinion among sundowners and loafers."

"Well, times have been bad," replied Ramm, with soothing impartiality, "and carriage is a consideration on an out-station like Wombo. I've sometimes thought it 'ud be a pretty calculation to strike a grog average for all hands, according to the rates that the bosses take their nips, and see how many bullock drays would be wanted in the year to fetch the liquor up from here to the Leura. I likes to give folks their due, whether it's Cusack or Tregaskiss."

"That's true," conceded the postman reflectively, as though the porterage question presented a new view of the subject; "and if this drought goes on, things will get dryer still every day. Bad times aint so much 'count to a

boss manager like Cusack of Brinda.Plains, who shears his thirty thousand sheep, and has got a southern company at his back. But there's another tune to sing when it's the case of a cattle station, with a debt on it most-like, and the meat-preserving places shut up, and no market for fats."

A gentleman in shirt sleeves and moleskins, with a red silk handkerchief round his waist, interrupted the discussion upon Mr. Tregaskiss' character and conditions, by shouting from the veranda of one of the minor public houses a much adjectived adjuration to the postman to stir the chestnut's stumps, and get his bags delivered and the letters sorted, as he—the individual in question—had no intention of wasting any more of his blanked time waiting for up-country mails, but meant to clear out of this brimstoned place as speedily as circumstances would permit. Whereupon Jemmy roared out that he was the servant of the Leichardt's Land Government, and not of any darned flash stockman, and stated explanatorily for the benefit of whom it might concern :

"I'm a bit ahead of my time to-day. The Leura Terror"—flicking the chestnut—"started bucking with me this morning, and I thought, as she was so flash, I'd give her a sickener. She's pretty well knocked out now. But, my word, she did perform this morning! I borrowed a pair of spurs at Flood's Selection and took it out of her."

"Oh, that be blowed for one of your yarns, Jemmy!" cried a second coatless gentleman from one of the other verandas. "I've seen all the bucking the old Terror can do, and it's pretty harmless. She couldn't kick for sour grapes. Your horses all buck like blazes—when no one is looking."

Again he received the impeachment with humility. It was not his habit to defend his own statements. He stuck spurs into the chestnut and made for the post office, where a little crowd was already waiting for the sorting and delivery of the mail brought by the incoming train.

CHAPTER II

DR. GENESTE.

Mrs. Tregaskiss, with her children and the half-caste, had gone over to the hotel. She followed the porter up a pair of log steps to that part of the veranda called by courtesy the private entrance. It was, however, only separated by a wooden railing from the other part, outside the public parlour, where the better class of bushmen smoked and drank and surveyed the life of the township. Half a dozen men were there now, lounging on squatter's chairs, with their pipes and newspapers, or else "yarning" together. They looked up and inspected Mrs. Tregaskiss with a good deal of interest, as she paused for a minute on the veranda waiting a response to the porter's call for Mrs. Ruffey, and uncertain as to which of the French windows she should enter by.

There presently appeared the landlady, in a crumpled, rather soiled China silk dress, wearing many rings, bangles, and other miscellaneous jewellery. She had the indefinable stamp of the diggings—the free, saucy, yet rough and ready, self-respecting air of a woman accustomed to dealing over a bar with customers who occasionally required plain speaking, if not even severer correction. A short colloquy took place on the veranda. Mrs. Ruffey cast a sympathetic glance at the baby, and a long look of compassionate curiosity at its mother. Ladies of the type of Mrs. Tregaskiss were not common in Mrs. Ruffey's experience. The tall, thin figure, dressed in cool, quiet gray, with a shady hat and veil tied beneath the chin ; the smooth, still, olive face ; the large, grave brown eyes ;

the almost painfully sweet, fixed smile, a smile so faint as to convey the idea of a studied and exquisite self-repression ; the extreme quietude of the gestures, and the musical voice, with that underlying note of passion—all expressed characteristics which seemed to separate Mrs. Tregaskiss absolutely from other squatters' wives of Mrs. Ruffey's acquaintance. The landlady dropped something of her free and easy air as she led them upstairs to a small sitting-room and rather larger bedchamber opening out of it, which, she said, made the only accommodation that could at present be given Mrs. Tregaskiss.

To Clare, in her weariness, the place seemed a haven.

"It would do very well," she said, "if perhaps a bed could be found elsewhere for the half-caste, Claribel."

The baby was crying louder now, and Mrs. Tregaskiss took it from the nurse's arms and hushed it against her bosom. "Would Mrs. Ruffey send up some warm water, some tea, a glass of milk for the little girl ; and would she have the saddle bags brought to them, and inform Mr. Tregaskiss on his arrival where to find her ? "

Mrs. Ruffey departed, followed by the half-caste. The mother unfastened her dress and suckled the infant. Presently its wail ceased, but the sustenance did not seem entirely satisfying, for it twisted about its tiny head, and murmured discontentedly. Mrs. Tregaskiss' form was girlish in its contours. She was not of the type which bounteously nourishes its young.

The baby fell asleep, and she sat on in the uncomfortable armchair, holding it more loosely, and not looking at it. Her thoughts had evidently wandered from the duties of maternity. Her limbs and features relaxed, and the brown eyes stared absently, while the strained smile dropped away, as it were, from her lips, which tightened in an expression that was tragic in its desolation and weariness—weariness not only of the body, but of soul and spirit as well.

Ning stood at the window watching the unloading of the

bullock drays, and making comments to her doll upon what was going on, in her shrill voice and odd half native vernacular. She turned to her mother :

"Oh, mummy, look out! Ning see another little girl, plenty high up on the dray. She's coming down by a ladder. And there's her mummy, and—oh, there's a baby, too! They been sit down on top of the wool bales close up under the tarpaulin. Mummy, what for you not let Jo Ramm drive us up to Wombo in his bullock dray. I be very good. I be *budgery* altogether."

Then finding that Mrs. Tregaskiss took no notice of her remarks, the child came and stood silently by the arm-chair, for several moments attentively regarding her mother's neck, left bare by the turned back bodice. She appeared to be struck by its extreme thinness, and stealing closer, passed her little fingers sympathetically over the prominent collar-bones and the transparent blue-veined flesh. She heaved a throaty sigh and made the sort of guttural "Yuck!" which the black gin gives when troubled or astonished.

"My word!" exclaimed Ning, with deep commiseration. "Plenty bone sit down there. Altogether meat run away."

Mrs. Tregaskiss burst into a laugh that was almost hysterical. The words, and the accent with which they were uttered, jarred upon her wandering thoughts, which, by some irrelevant association of ideas, had travelled to a modern "high art" South Kensington studio. She was picturing her friend Gladys Warraker, now Hilditch, making tea among the palms, bulrushes, dilapidated properties, and dingy draperies, which she, Clare, had once revolted from as "stuffy," affected, and sham-æsthetic, but which she now recalled with a faint envy as contrasting pleasantly with the glare and bareness and rough angles of this thirsty, uncivilised land. Ning's speech accentuated crude realities. She checked her laugh as the babe stirred uneasily upon her lap.

"Oh, Ning! take care not to wake little sister. Ningie has forgotten all mummy told her," she went on, in a low voice. "You know mummy said that you weren't to talk blacks' language. You are a little white girl, not a pickaninny from the camp."

"C'aribel 'minds Ning of blacks' language," exclaimed the child. "C'aribel says 'budgery' and 'plenty sit down.' She no good white woman; she altogether like it black fellow."

"Not altogether like it black fellow," corrected Mrs. Tregaskiss. "Claribel talks too much like the blacks. That is what Ning means. But Claribel is half white, and will soon learn better. We are going to teach her to live in a house and to talk and do things like white people."

Ning shook her head doubtfully. She had no faith in Claribel's regeneration.

"What for daddy not have white servants like Mr. Cusack?" she asked. "White servants are much better. Mrs. Cusack has three white women servants at Brinda Plains, and there is a Chinaman for a cook besides. What for, mummy, we no have white women at Wombo, only a Chinaman?"

What for! The contrast between the domestic arrangements of Mount Wombo, her own home, and Brinda Plains had often forced itself upon Mrs. Tregaskiss, as it had done upon Ning, though she was not given to petty jealousy. After all, the question was easily answered.

"Because daddy has lost a great deal of money, Ningie, my dear, and because the bank would turn us out of Mount Wombo, and we should be like the blacks, and have no house to live in, if we spent too much money in paying servants' wages. Now go again to the window and watch Ramm and the bullock drays until Claribel comes back."

Mrs. Tregaskiss got up, careful not to disturb the sleeping child, whom she carried into the next room. She placed it on the bed and laid herself down beside it for a

few minutes, hushing it off into sound asleep before she dared to remove her arm. The little chamber with its zinc roof and uncurtained windows, through which the sun streamed and the noise from the township entered unmuffled, was horribly glaring and oppressive in the coarse whiteness of mosquito curtains and cheap light wall paper. The canvas ceiling, up to which she vacantly stared, was speckled with flies, winged ants, and long-legged curious insects. A spider, as fat and bloated as a tarantula, had drawn its web across one of the corners, and flies buzzed down, making their sickening noise round the sleeping child's face ; they were getting dull and heavy, as flies do in the heavy summer days, and one settled at the corner of the infant's mouth, wet still with its mother's milk. Clare rose and drew down the white blind in an ineffectual attempt to darken the room. The sun, which was setting toward the horizon, threw off reddish gleams from the iron roofs of the houses opposite. She looked up the whitey-brown road to see if there was any sign of her husband's buggy, but she saw only another incoming dray, and a rider with a pack-horse moving outward. The great brown plain, with dull patches of lignum vitæ, and salt bush, brown too, and looking like heaps of earth or stones, made her think of the desert as she had seen it once from Biskrah in Algiers, only that there were no palms in the foreground. She felt a little faint and dizzy. The heat was like a tangible weight upon her head, and she remembered that she had not eaten much during the journey, and thought that she would go into the sitting-room and see if there were a bell by means of which she could hurry Mrs. Ruffey with the tea. Then she almost laughed at herself for imagining that there could be a bell-pull in a zinc bush inn. If there had been one, it would not have made much difference, for she had hardly crossed the threshold of the inner room when a giddiness overpowered her. For an instant, walls and floor swayed, and then

they settled into blackness, and before she could snatch at anything for support, she had fallen down in a dead swoon.

Ning uttered an astonished shriek as, at the sound of her mother's fall, she turned from the contemplation of the drays and saw the prostrate form. There had not happened, in the child's experience, such a thing as that a grown-up person should incontinently tumble flat after that fashion. When Mrs. Tregaskiss made no sign nor movement in answer to the child's calls, "Mummy, get up! —mummy, what for you tumble down?—mummy, is 'oo dead?" and when the inert hand which she lifted fell back with a thud on the floor, Ning was frightened. She rushed out, down the narrow stairs and into the lower parlour, where the landlady was talking to a tall gentleman who appeared to be paying his bill.

"Oh, please come up and look at mummy!" she screamed. "Mummy has tumbled down and won't get up. I want to know if mummy is dead."

"My goodness!" cried the landlady. "Perhaps she has fainted; and I don't wonder. It's Mrs. Tregaskiss," she explained rapidly to the gentleman; "just come up from Port Victoria. She looked regular done up with the train journey. Baby not much more than a month old. Will you help me to see to her, Dr. Geneste?"

Mrs. Ruffey led the way, the gentleman following without question. He stopped at the foot of the stairs, and took Ning's hand. The child was whimpering, "I want to know if mummy is dead."

"No, no! don't be frightened, little woman. Your mother is only tired. I expect she will be all right presently."

The half-caste, who at the child's call had come in from some back region, caught Ning up in her sturdy arms, saying: "Ba'al you cry, pickaninny. That no good," and echoed the doctor's assurance: "Plenty soon missus all right."

Mrs. Tregaskiss revived quickly under the ministrations of Mrs. Ruffey and Dr. Geneste. The man was a stranger to her,—he was, as a matter of fact, the new "boss" at Darra-Darra of whom the postman had spoken,—and she stared in bewilderment as she opened her eyes and saw, bending over her, a large spare form, and a face totally unfamiliar—keen, kindly, lined, and of the falcon type. Then she became aware of the touch of hands, gentle, steady, and curiously competent, and closed her eyes again with a sense of relief. She seemed to know intuitively that he was a doctor, and yielded herself without question to his treatment.

He gave her some brandy and water, which Mrs. Ruffey brought from below. They had lifted her on to the rough sofa, and he raised her head on his arm while she drank. His voice appealed to her pleasantly.

"I'm afraid it isn't very comfortable ; we'll have some pillows."

Mrs. Ruffey brought two from the adjoining room. The doctor felt Mrs. Tregaskiss' pulse.

"That's better."

She opened her eyes again.

"I fainted, I suppose. But I'm all right now. I have had one or two of these giddy fits lately."

"Have you ?" He looked at her gravely. "You must have come down pretty suddenly," he said. "Your fall shook the building. I hope you didn't hurt yourself ?"

She sat up, and put her hand first to her forehead and then to the back of her head. "I think I have given myself a bump ; but it's nothing of any consequence."

At that moment the baby in the next room woke and cried. Mrs. Tregaskiss moved quickly, and would have got up from the sofa, but the doctor motioned her back.

"No, no, please ; you'll be fainting again. Isn't there someone else who can look after the baby ?"

"Claribel !" called Mrs. Tregaskiss, with an effort ;

and when the half-caste appeared, bade her bring in the child.

Dr. Geneste smiled.

"It's not an appropriate name, exactly," she said, with a wan shadow of his smile, "but Claribel holds to it, and objects to 'Bel.'"

"They don't make bad nurses," said Dr. Geneste, "if the old Adam doesn't crop up, as in my experience it generally does. Most civilised half-castes I have known took to the bush in the long run."

"Oh, I hope not! I am teaching Claribel. I always had an idea that I should like to tame a half-caste. Yes, give baby to me."

She held out her arms for the infant, which was crying in feeble fretfulness. It had been awakened by a mosquito that had crept in under the netting. The poor little thing was hot, and wet with perspiration. Mrs. Tregaskiss wiped its head and forehead with her pocket handkerchief, loosened its neck covering, and hushed it against her bosom, with the patient attention she had shown in putting it asleep. But the baby cried more loudly, taking no comfort from her ministrations. Mrs. Tregaskiss swayed herself to and fro, in a vain attempt to still its wailing, and then with a despairing gesture handed it to Claribel.

"I think that perhaps she wants to be walked about. Take her into the next room, and try and make her go bye-bye again."

Claribel rocked the child in her strong arms, crooned to it a monotonous Corobboree tune, and before many minutes had it sound asleep once more. Dr. Geneste had been silently watching the scene. He noticed the hysterical quiver in Mrs. Tregaskiss' throat, and saw that her nerves were tortured by the heat, glare, noise, and irritating presence of the fretful baby, almost beyond her power of control.

"I wish that you would let me go and find you a

quiet room to rest in," he said ; "or else send the children away."

"Oh, I can't ! and it doesn't matter. Ning, child, don't you cry too. Mummy is quite well now. Ning is tired and hungry. I am afraid that my fainting fit has made them forget the tea."

She turned courteously to Mrs. Ruffey, who ran out with an exclamation of dismay.

"I should advise something more sustaining than tea for you," said Dr. Geneste. "I'll go and forage, if you don't mind, presently. I dare say there's some soup to be had, or one might beat up an egg with brandy. You are exhausted ; your pulse is dreadfully low. May I dose you ?" She looked at him, he fancied, a little doubtfully, and he hastened to add : "Perhaps I ought to apologise for being here. Mrs. Ruffey brought me up when the child ran down and said you had fallen. I really am a doctor, though I have turned squatter these days, and only physic people who can't get anyone else to do it. There is no one else, I believe, here or on the Leura. I assure you that, one way and another, I have a good many patients in my consulting room at the Humpey on Darra-Darra."

"Darra-Darra ! "

"We are neighbours, I think. I must have taken possession while you have been away at Port Victoria."

"Oh, yes ! I had not heard."

"My name is Geneste."

"Geneste ! Oh, yes !—and you are the explorer ?"

"I did that trip Gulfwards, if that is what you mean, and opened up a bit of Northern country. It's not a tremendous achievement."

"Oh, I don't know——" She seemed able only to speak vaguely. "There was a great deal about it, wasn't there, in the papers ? And then the Government—I remember hearing it said that the Ministry ought to have made some recognition——"

"Governments aren't quick at recognition, in that sense. Not that it matters, or that I wanted it. I'm glad to have pioneered for the telegraph line, at any rate. That's something for the country. Now I'm a bit crippled, and am going to see what I can get out of Darra-Darra. These long droughts are ruination. I hear your husband is doing a good deal in the way of boring. I should like to talk to him about his artesian wells some time."

"I hope you will come over and see us at Mount Wombo," she said faintly.

He saw that she was getting white, and felt the pulse flutter. In a moment he was the doctor again.

"Do you mind my seeing if I can't help you a little? though, no doubt, your doctor at Port Victoria gave you something for this sort of heart weakness."

"He did not say that there was anything wrong with my heart."

"It's weak, that is all. You are anæmic, and I expect the baby is a little too much for you. How old is it?"

"Six weeks. I have not seen Dr. Finley of Port Victoria quite lately. He never examined my heart."

Dr. Geneste asked several questions, and listened for a minute or two with his ear against her chest and side. Presently she explained that she was on her way home, and was expecting Mr. Tregaskiss to meet her that evening. They were to start, she said, for Mount Wombo the next day.

"You'll rest a day or two at Brinda Plains, won't you?"

"I don't know whether we shall go that way. There are two roads, you know, almost at right angles with this place, and one as short as the other."

"Yes, I know. I have ridden up that way. Brinda Plains is a comfortable station, and Mrs. Cusack and her daughter are so kind. I thought you would find it a pleasant break in your journey."

"Yes, it would be a nice break. We don't very often

go to Brinda Plains ; though Mrs. Cusack, as you say, is so kind, and I haven't seen Helen Cusack for ages—not since she came back from Melbourne. My husband and Mr. Cusack don't always get on very well, and I can't tell exactly why. Mr. Cusack is rather tiresome in some ways; and then, when stations adjoin, it is so easy to quarrel about unbranded calves."

She gave an uncertain little laugh, and he did not pursue the subject. The medical conversation was resumed for a few moments, and Dr. Geneste asked permission to send up a reviving mixture—some drops which he said she would find useful in preventing the attacks of faintness, and which he hoped to procure at the store in the township. He supposed there was a place where drugs were to be obtained.

"I have a regular dispensary at Darra," he said. "You must remember that if you should ever be in need. And it's lucky sometimes for the out-station people that I am handy. I just managed to save the stockman's wife at Kyabra the other day. She had given herself poison by mistake, instead of to the native dogs."

Tea came in. It was not an unappetising meal, of fresh scones and new-laid eggs, which Mrs. Tregaskiss declared were all that she could desire. Dr. Geneste helped Ning, and waited upon his patient, whom he would not allow to rise from her sofa. He had all the bushman's ready-handedness, and there was just sufficient aloofness in his frank cordiality to convey a suggestion of deference. It seemed to Mrs. Tregaskiss that his manner was, in some ways, more English than Australian, and she wondered how long he had lived in the wilds. She watched him as he poured out Ning's cup of milk and spread her scone with butter. His appearance attracted her. He was not a young man : she guessed him to be about forty. He looked extremely tall—his actual height was six feet three ; but, though he had a well-knit frame and broad, muscular shoulders, his

leanness made him seem even taller. He was lame in one leg, which he dragged stiffly, the result of a spear wound, Mrs. Tregaskiss learned later; and this accident, she also learned, had been the cause of his giving up the more adventurous career. He was brown and weather-beaten, and the face was seamed and lined in a manner out of proportion with his years; but it was an impressive face, full of determination and refinement, and decidedly intellectual. The eyes were gray, keen, and rather hard in their normal expression; but, even in this short interview, Mrs. Tregaskiss discovered that they had a way of dilating and softening so suddenly and completely that, for the moment, the whole character of the countenance was changed. The features had, too, a peculiarity, not at first noticeable, of assuming a mask-like immobility, the refuge possibly of a nervous temperament afraid of self-betrayal. For the rest, Dr. Geneste's face was more interesting than handsome; in complexion it was sallow beneath the sunburn; the hair was dark brown, and the beard short, silky, and pointed, of a lighter hue.

When tea was over, he bade Mrs. Tregaskiss good-bye, promising to send her the medicine he had recommended, and regretting that he should not see her again for the present, as he was leaving that night on his way back to Darra-Darra.

"Unfortunately I have an appointment at Flood's Selection to-morrow morning," he said, "with the manager of a meat-preserving establishment, or I should be happy to stay till your husband's arrival on the chance of being useful. But you, as a squatter's wife, Mrs. Tregaskiss, no doubt know that butchers and cattle-buyers are just the only people in the world who must not be kept waiting."

Oh, yes! Mrs. Tregaskiss had learned that lesson; and so she laughingly assured him. Royalty did not claim greater consideration in England than the Port Victoria butcher and the manager of the meat-preserving establish-

ment in Australia. To her personally, it was a matter of the deepest importance whether or not these personages found her to their liking upon their business visits to Mount Wombo. She often wished that her husband, like Mr. Cusack, owned sheep principally, instead of cattle, since the wool market was independent of butchers.

"But not of shearers," said Dr. Geneste. "I hear that Mr. Cusack anticipates trouble with the Unionists, as the strikers call themselves, and that there is to be a big fight when shearing time comes on. Well, anyhow, I hope you will get through your journey all right, Mrs. Tregaskiss, and that you will follow my advice now and go straight to bed. I shall take an early opportunity of riding over to Mount Wombo to find out how you are and to make your husband's acquaintance."

She thanked him. "You have been very kind to me," she said.

Something in the tone of her voice affected him. Although she had only spoken on commonplace matters, and had said little, she had given him the impression of a woman of more than average intellect and of keen sensibility. She seemed to him utterly unsuited to her surroundings. And yet no word nor look of hers justified the suspicion that she was discontented with her lot. It was her face which was pathetic. It suggested a deep, underlying regret. A vision of it remained with him continuously for some hours. As he rode along in the dusk toward Flood's Selection he was haunted by the delicate aquiline features, the deep brown eyes, and the patient smiling mouth. She had the expression of one waiting for the answer to some mysterious problem of life, to which she could in her own experience find no clue.

"That is it," he murmured. "It is the Sphinx look—which has always had the most extraordinary fascination for me." He recalled in imagination the black heads of the exquisite monsters, and of the earlier Pharaohs in the

Egyptian gallery of the British Museum, where in his student days he had been wont to while away many an hour.

At one time, during a certain metaphysical phase, through which imaginative temperaments of a particular caste are bound to pass, he had explained this predilection by the theory of pre-existence. But such speculations are apt to crumble to nothingness under the pressure of every-day facts ; and of late years mysticism of the kind had ceased to have any but a poetic attraction for him. The higher type of man is always more or less dual, and in natures like that of Geneste, the dreamer and the man of action have alternate periods of predominance.

He mused as he rode along the great plain, its gaunt expanse faintly illuminated by a moon at the third quarter. The orb's chastened splendour seemed to harmonise curiously with the image his mind retained of Mrs. Tregaskiss. Geneste's thoughts were sufficiently defined to have been uttered aloud.

"Yes, it's the look of having wandered out of a far past—a look of expiation. She might be the outcome of an age which has produced all that is most magnificent and most subtle in the world's history. She has the grand simplicity of an absolute superiority ; the unconsciousness of complete dignity. She doesn't know herself why she is an anachronism and an anomaly, but she is both, and that's the pathos of her. Of course she suffers from the jar between her own nature and her surroundings. One realises the suffering in her smile. I have never seen a smile like hers : it gives one the notion of an unspeakable far-awayness. A remoteness even from the natural maternal interest. I could make that out from the way in which she handled the baby. But how painstakingly she did it ! Maternity with this woman is a duty, not a passion. But that's a modern characteristic. There's nothing of the human mammal about the complex woman of to-day. She has refined the brute maternal instinct into an intel-

lectual obligation—an immense social responsibility." He laughed aloud. "Anyhow, she is an odd study, the modern woman—a queer mixture of sensuousness and cold-bloodedness; of idealism and hard and fast logic; of morbid nerve-tissue and ferocious determination not to knock under. To do anything big in diseases of the nervous system, the physician must attack woman from a new starting point. I'm glad I gave up the business—or rather that the business gave up me. Yet it was intensely interesting. Mrs. Tregaskiss is the type of woman who, under favouring morbid conditions, might develop into one of the revolting tribe—the sort of modern instance I might have expected to see in my Harley Street consulting room, seeking ghostly counsel along physiological tracks from the physician-priest of the nineteenth century. She would have been quite harmonious with the European background. But here—set in this primitive barbarism, where all the elemental instincts are rampant, what in the name of Heaven is she going to make of herself and of her life!"

Then his thoughts wandered to another woman—one of a very different type. A young girl who suggested only what was limpid, sweet, pastoral, and altogether feminine, with clear gray eyes that had no hint in them of mysterious reincarnation and old-world subtleties: the sort of creature in whom wifehood and maternity would be as natural and beautiful as the opening forth of bud into fragrant blossom. He thought of the girl with a half impatient regret.

"It won't do," he said to himself. "It would be just as fatal for her as for me. That kind of thing in a woman never appealed to me, and it's too late to try it now. It wouldn't be fair on her either. I wonder if she thinks any more of that moment's folly. I wonder if she understood. At any rate I'll try to make it all as clear to her as I can without showing myself an unutterable cad. I never ought to have done it. Poor little Helen!"

CHAPTER III.

UNMATED.

While Dr. Geneste was making his moonlight journey, Clare Tregaskiss lay within the mosquito curtains on one of the two beds in her room, her baby by her side. The other bed was still vacant, awaiting her husband. Ning was sleeping on the sofa in the sitting-room, an improvised mosquito curtain protecting her face and chest in, it seemed, but an ineffectual manner, for she stirred and muttered and flung her little arms out from under the sheets in a restless slumber. The door between the two rooms stood open, and the lamp, turned down, cast a blurred glow and gave out a disagreeable smell of bad kerosene. The air in the room was dry and scorching, the zinc roof throwing down heat as though it had been the top of an oven. There were neither shutters nor curtains to the window, and the moon, shining through the thin white calico blind, gave the effect of an opaque illuminated oblong. Myriads of insects were astir,—mosquitoes, cock-chafers, moths, flying ants, and beetles,—all kinds of winged, uncanny things, circling round toward the lighted doorway, and filling the place with a low roar, which was a sort of accompaniment to the noise of the township, the oaths of bullock-drivers "wetting the wool" after their unloadings, the click of billiard balls, the loud chaff of bushmen and diggers in the hotel verandas, and the sound of the bells hung round the necks of bullocks and horses that were going out to grass.

As the evening wore on, and the men took in more and

more liquor, the oaths and ribald language, distinctly audible through the zinc partitions, became unpleasant hearing for the ears of a refined woman. Clare had tried in vain to escape from the brutal sounds, had shut the window to find that this made little difference, and that it was impossible to endure the stifling heat. She was not so horrified at the bad language as might have been many a woman. She accepted it, as she accepted other disagreeable conditions of her life and surroundings, with a certain lofty tolerance, mingled with stoical resignation. She took refuge in imagination, after a fashion of her own, and now deafened herself to what she did not wish to hear by recalling the swing and beat of some orchestral measure, or by a mental phonographic proces, reconstructed in fancy the swelling rhythmic measures she had heard at a Wagner recital. She was not musical in the technical sense. She could not sing a note, and though she had a piano at Mount Wombo she never had time to practise, and her performance was poor. But she had an almost passionate love for deep-sounding complex harmonies. Organ vibrations stirred her nerves as did nothing else, and of all the pleasures of her old London life, music, which she had once thought would be dispensed with most easily, was that for which she now had the strongest craving.

But the effort of memory grew irksome ; the unreal sounds died away, and her mind came back to the present. She looked down upon her baby. Poor little thing ! She was fond of it, of course ; but why was she not as fond of it as some mothers were of their offspring ? Why did it seem to her only a cruelty that it should have been born into a crude, harsh, unsympathetic world, insufficiently equipped for the moral struggle by beneficent hereditary influences ? Why should she, who felt herself unfitted by temperament for the burden of such a responsibility, and who had a weary distaste for the whole business of multiplying her kind, and could see no usefulness in it, have

been chosen as the producer of this new atom to swell the generally unsatisfactory human aggregate?

The two papaw apple trees growing in front of the hotel imaged on the blind caught her eye. They had straight, spear-like stems and crowns of spiky leaves, which, as a faint wind stirred them, made weird shadows. One was a male plant, the other a female. She could tell this by the outlines of feathery flowers hanging below the leafy plume of one, and the grotesque shapes of pendant pumpkin-like fruit on the other. Was there no escape even in vegetable life from the bewildering sex problem?

She was thinking these thoughts when the clatter of buggy wheels and dull thud of the unshod hoofs of pack-horses sounded up the street, and then stopped in front of the hotel. Presently she heard the voice of her children's father in answer to a shout from one of the bushmen in the inn veranda.

"Hallo, Tregaskiss! Those horses of yours look pretty well knocked up!"

"Yes, confound them!"

Tregaskiss had a full, rather loud voice, with the rise and fall of intonation common to Australians, and an imperious ring in its notes which, according to occasion, might take the form either of boisterous cordiality or of ill-humor.

"Had the deuce of a business," he went on. "The brutes bolted last night from The Grave—halfway to Brinda Plains. It's all that d——d Brinda breed. They have a trick of making back. But these are slashing mares all the same, as you can see by daylight. I wouldn't wish for better goers. They'd pull a buggy out of anything."

Clare winced at the expletives. She had risen when the buggy stopped, and now sat, a ghostly form wrapped in a light dressing gown, at the side of the bed. She had not minded the "swear-words," as Ning called them, when

the bullock-drivers had used them, but she did not like them in her husband's mouth.

Tregaskiss exclaimed in the tone of irate superiority with which white men often address their black servitors: "Look out there, Tommy George, you infernal idiot! Haven't you learned yet how to unstrap a pack? Oh! good-evening, Mrs. Ruffey! Send someone round, will you, if they're not all in bed or drunk? Has Mrs. Tregaskiss come?"

"She's upstairs," announced the landlady. "As for my men being drunk, Mr. Tregaskiss, they keep that for off Sundays. You'll spell the horse a day, I suppose?"

"Not I. We clear out to-morrow, and serve the mares right for sweating themselves on the bolt. Let's have a light, Mrs. Ruffey, and show me the way up. Oh, look here! you may bring me a nip before I go upstairs."

After a few minutes his heavy step shook the creaky wooden stair and zinc walls. Mrs. Ruffey had not thought it necessary to ascend. Tregaskiss shouted down to her: "That's all right! I know where I am. The black boy can bring up my swag. Let me have something to eat, will you? And you may as well send me a bottle of whiskey and some cool water, if you've got any."

He pushed open the door of the sitting-room and turned up the smoking lamp. "Phew! By Jove, it's hot and beastly smelling!" He flung wide the ricketty French windows which led out on a narrow balcony. "Where are you, Clare? Oh, here's the Pickaninny!"

Ning—whose pet name for Thyra was a corruption, graduating as "Ningie," of her father's title for her, "The Pickaninny"—had been roused by the noise and the flood of light, and now started from her sofa-bed veiled in mosquito netting, which she tore off in a bewildered haste—an elfish creature, with tangled hair and wide, suddenly awakened eyes.

"Daddy!"

"Yes, you brat. Give us a hug, Pickaninny. Did I scare you? Been dreaming, eh?"

"Mine been dream about debil-debil," said Ning solemnly, relapsing into her blacks' vernacular. "Mine think it debil-debil get inside me and take me over the paddock fence into his big fire. But the fire went out, and God came and asked me if I was a good girl, and then God took me back to mummy."

Tregaskiss laughed loudly. "That was a good job, wasn't it! We don't all get out of debil-debil's clutches so easily. But then we aint all good little girls. Oh, you're a Pickaninny yet, you are! Daddy's Pickaninny. Come. There now! a right-down good old hug."

He caught the child in his arms, mosquito netting and bed-clothes trailing behind her, and smothered her with loud sounding kisses. "Where's your mummy?"

"I'm here, Keith."

Clare stood in the doorway. He took up the lamp, still holding the child and looked at his wife.

"Good Lord, Clare! Poor old girl! You do look like a ghost. Knocked out, eh?"

"Yes, rather; we started at four o'clock this morning. It's a dreadfully long, slow journey, stopping at all the little roadside stations. I'm really glad the railway doesn't go any further. I'd much rather travel in the buggy and camp out."

"Well, you'll have two nights of that, and I was thinking we might spell a day at Brinda Plains. The Gripper has been behaving a little more decently lately. I helped him with his muster, and I rather want to talk to him about wire-fencing the boundary."

"Oh! How have things been getting on, Keith, on the station?"

"As bad as can be. No sign of the drought breaking up, and cattle dying everywhere. There was the devil of a mess driving down the last mob of fats, and a bad sale at

the end. Hardly enough to cover droving expenses. I was a fool to agree to Gryce's terms. I told you so at the time, you remember, and you advised me to accept. One hundred pounds down on taking delivery, and fifty pounds a month for droving. It was exorbitant, but you misled me by telling me that was what old Cyrus Chance paid. I knew what a nipper he is, and that he'd be bound to give the lowest price. It was all an infernal concoction of Cusack's new chums. The Gripper put them up to getting a rise out of me."

"Oh, I'm sorry! But it wasn't from the Cusacks that I heard. Mr. Chance's storekeeper told me those were the terms."

"Well, it was a lie. Cyrus Chance never paid anything like that. You must have muddled up figures. Women always do. I mustn't depend on yours for the future. But never mind, old girl. It's a good thing to have you home. Are you glad to get back to your old hubby."

"I'm—very glad, Keith. Very glad of course, to see you again."

"And so am I to see you, old dear!" He put the lamp on the table and still holding Ning, whose head had dropped sleepily on his shoulder, went up to his wife and affectionately kissed her. "And the Pickaninny too! Good little Kiddie. I declare I think I've missed her almost as much as I've missed you. By Jove, the place has seemed a desert without you both!"

"There's a new Pickaninny now, Keith."

"By Jove, so there is! I had forgotten the little shaver for the moment. Let's see him, Clare. No, it's a second *she*, isn't it? I rather wish it had been a boy, now, since the two other poor little chaps came to nothing."

Clare led the way into the bedroom where the baby lay, its little red face nestling into the pillow. Tregaskiss contemplated the creature with an amused interest, much as he might have contemplated a new-born puppy.

"Not a bad little cuss. I suppose it will get whiter in time. Looks rather like a blob of pink putty. Ning was much more human when she was six weeks old."

"Dark babies always are. This one will be fair, like you. Ning took after me."

Tregaskiss turned his eyes upon his wife with a freshly kindled gleam of admiration. "So much the better for Ning, as she is a woman. Now, if this brat had been a boy it might have taken after me and been a fairly decent looking chap, on a large scale into the bargain."

He gave the little fatuous laugh of self-satisfaction which was a trick of his, and which always jarred upon Clare. It was one of Tregaskiss' weaknesses to be somewhat vain of his strength and robust good looks. He might in truth have been considered a handsome man, of the coarser mould. Ten years ago, before his features had thickened and his skin had become red and rough-grained, and when he had been less inclined to stoutness, there could have been no doubt as to the attractiveness of his person. One might have imagined a woman very much in love with him—but not a woman quite of the type of Mrs. Tregaskiss. Some little frail amiable doll perhaps, without much intellect, and the kind of temperament which is naturally subservient to brute force. Tregaskiss was fashioned rather upon the Viking model. He was huge—as tall as Dr. Geneste, and much broader and thicker of girth. In spite of the active life he led, his weight could not have been less than fourteen or fifteen stone. He had a great bull neck, and a large head, with close cropped yellow hair, which fell into little rings over a round low forehead. The eyes were bright blue, slightly bloodshot, the nose well-shaped, but broad at the bridge, and with two small furrows on each side marking a puffiness between the eye-sockets and the mouth, which gave an appearance of coarseness. He had even teeth, discoloured by smoking, a yellow moustache with long points, and a curly fair beard—the kind of beard

which divides in the middle and shows the cleft of chin. Although he was proud of being a "fine man," he was careless about his dress. To-night he looked disordered after his journey,—which was not to be wondered at,—hot, dusty, and redder than usual; his light alpaca coat had stains upon it, and his coloured shirt was unbuttoned at the neck, showing the inside griminess of the collar, and beads of perspiration stood upon his forehead and his great red hands.

Clare stiffened just a little as he put his arm round her and drew her closer to him, in their joint gaze at their child. The harsh, virile odour which came from him, and seemed to tell of the night's camping out and the day's travel in close proximity with hot beasts, mingled with an aroma of tobacco and of the whiskey he had recently imbibed, struck unpleasantly upon her nerves. She was a woman extremely fastidious in such trifles, and had an almost sensuous delight in delicate fresh scents. One of the things which went far toward reconciling her to life on Mount Wombo was the perfume of the sandal-wood logs, which she kept for burning in the sitting-room in the winter.

But something of the same conscientious self-discipline which marked her manner to her children, showed itself in her bearing to her husband. She seemed to become instantly alive to the impulse of repugnance in herself, and atoned for it by laying her hand caressingly upon his shoulder; and thus together they contemplated the sleeping infant for a moment or two in silence. Then she withdrew her hand and disengaged herself gently from his embrace.

"Yes, I wish too that she had been a boy. Not exactly for your reason, though."

"For what reason, then?"

"Oh, because I think women have the worst of it in the world—at any rate in the bush."

"I don't see that. Things are always made as easy for you as they can be up here. Of course the life's rough, but if it is so for women, it's rougher still for men. You can keep in doors if you choose. But how would you like droving cattle across country with rations running short, and the water-bags getting empty? And I wonder if you'd enjoy a day after scrubbers through gidia and burrum bush, or else drafting off a camp in the blazing sun and branding till sundown, and then coming home dog-tired to salt junk and damper—and all the worry of the men, and bad sales, and drought, and a big debt, with the chance of the bank coming down on you into the bargain?"

"It seems to me that we women have our share of those worries too," said Clare. "As for the station work, I used rather to envy you men the wild free rides and the living with nature and the grandness and reality of it all. Do you remember, I had a perfect crave for out-of-door life long ago—after the hollowness and insincerity and stuffiness of London. I used to fancy then that it must make people truer and better and purer. You know I loved an easy day on the run, before the babies came, and when I was strong, and not the poor creature I seem to have grown into."

"An easy day!" echoed Tregaskiss. "A kid-glove kind of mustering in cool weather, just outside the paddock fences, and the men blessing you all the time because they daren't let out an oath. I think you found it a bit too real sometimes, Clare, and you got deuced sulky when I swore at you for getting in the way. You expected me to keep up honeymoon manners, but I've broken you in, haven't I, and we're none the less good friends for it?"

"No, none the less good friends, Keith," she repeated, with that curious smile. "But that wasn't what I meant when I wished that baby had been a boy."

"What did you mean?" he asked.

"Oh, men get rid of their illusions quicker," she an-

swered. "Or else they never grow them, which is better still—at least I suppose it is better, if the illusions are bound to wither before the morning has become day. Women are so helpless," she went on, her voice taking a deeper inflexion, "so blind, so ignorant, so hedged in. They can't go into the open and judge of things as men do. They can't even judge of themselves. They don't know what they are capable of or deficient in. They don't know what they want."

"Well, most of them seem to know that they want a husband," said Tregaskiss with a laugh. "And after all, Clare, a woman can't do much better than that—if she gets a good one ; and a man can't be better off than with a good wife."

There was genuine feeling in his tone ; it touched Clare.

"No, Keith, I suppose there can't be anything better in the world than a happy marriage. But people's ideas of happiness and of love are different, aren't they ? and women have dreams and wayward fancies. In the end we settle down to doing our duty, and we find satisfaction in it, but in the beginning, when we are young and romantic, and long for drama and thrill and communion of mind and the poetry of love, and all the rest ! That's how it's hard for women—for some women. They've got to grind down the edge of their imagination, and to pull their ideals to pieces, and to scatter in fragments all their fond and foolish beliefs, and it—it's a painful process, Keith, and I'd rather not have to watch a daughter of mine going through it."

Tregaskiss looked at her, at once annoyed, uneasy, and amused. "Oh, confound ideals ! That used to be a great word of yours, Clare. I thought I had laughed you out of it, though, upon my soul, I never did quite know what you meant by it ! I hate hearing you talk like that. It makes me think of those long-haired South Kensington painters and the ladies in queer dresses with notions, that you used to tell me you were so sick of. Besides, it puts it into my

head that you aren't happy, and that isn't true. Anyhow, you always say that you are happy enough."

"Oh, yes, Keith, don't mind! Of course I am happy enough."

"Ideals!" he went on wrathfully; "poetry, sentiment, the sort of stuff you read in novels. Fine words and infernal tommy-rot, as I always said to you, dear. They don't breed out West."

"No, you laughed me out of my fancy that ideals might exist in the bush. That's one of the vanished illusions. They don't seem to fraternise with sheep and cattle—in this part of Leichardt's Land."

"Do you think they thrived any better on Ubi Downs where you came from?"

"I don't know. I suppose not. I was only ten years old, you know, when I left it. And yet," she went on dreamily, "I kept a vision of Ubi Downs all those years, as of a sort of Promised Land—the mountains and the strange sunsets and the river and the great bunya scrubs. The Erl King and Sintram and Undine lived in that bunya scrub and the creek that came down from the gorge. I can remember it quite well."

"And you married me because you thought I was going to bring you to your Promised Land, was that it?"

"Perhaps it was—a little, Keith."

"Good Lord, Clare! you are childish with your Erl King and your fairy-tale people. I suppose they are in a fairy-tale. *I* never heard of them anywhere else. What has come over you to-night?"

"I don't know, Keith. One gets thinking, lying awake in the moonlight."

"Thinking! What about?"

"Oh, about ideals, and drama, and thrill, and different kinds of love—everything that makes the poetry of life. But I quite agree with you: it's stupid to talk of them,

and Gladys Warraker and I agreed long ago not to expect them in the ordinary run of things."

"Well, anyhow, I thought you had dropped all such rubbish since you came here. Ideals, drama, and thrill, and different kinds of love!" he repeated, with bluff scorn. "By Jove! do you remember our sitting by the waterhole at Wombo, soon after we came up, and your reading to me something by some German chap, and asking me if that was how I loved you, and your disgust when I told you it was all rot?"

Clare gave a slight shudder, and then laughed, an odd, nervous laugh. "Yes, you have taught me that."

"I have made you practical, my dear. Upon my soul! if it hadn't been for having married me, you'd be lost in the clouds by now. I've brought you down to earth—I and the children."

"Yes," she again assented; "you and the children. One can't be anything but practical when there are babies crying around, and only a half-caste or a black gin to look after them."

"Well, that's your own fault, Clare. I said you could get a nurse out of one of the emigrant ships at Port Victoria."

"Oh, she wouldn't have stayed! She would have complained that it was too rough, or too dull, or else the mosquitoes and sandflies would have eaten her up. And I'm so anxious to get that wretched debt cleared off. I don't want to add to expenses, especially as I brought you nothing. That's being practical, isn't it?"

"You're a splendid old dear! I'm bound to say that there's not another woman I know, brought up like you, that would work in the same way to keep things together. As for the debt, if I could get a couple of good seasons and a market for fat cattle, I'd soon clear it off, and we'd take a trip home, and then settle down on your beloved Ubi, in the heart of civilisation. Confound that

woman! when is she going to send me up something to eat?"

He went noisily to the staircase and called down. After a few minutes a young woman, who had been serving at the bar, brought in a tray with cold beef and bread and a bottle of whiskey. Tregaskiss threw off his coat, poured himself out some whiskey and water, and called to his wife to come in and "yarn." She obeyed the peremptory call without a murmur, though she had lain down again upon the bed beside the baby, and was, in truth, almost worn out. She waited upon her husband while he made a hearty meal, and chatted cheerfully upon Leura concerns the while, having, it appeared, quite recovered from her sentimental mood. They talked about the delinquencies of the "Gripper," otherwise Mr. Cusack; the new boundary between Wombo and Brinda Plains; the surveyors to be employed; the stockkeeping capacity of a "new chum" lately installed at Mount Wombo; the number of the last branding. It was not till Tregaskiss had lighted his pipe and tilted back his chair that he was struck for the second time by his wife's wan looks, and again declared that she looked like a ghost. He insisted upon giving her some weak whiskey and water, and expressed compunction for having kept her up, fussing over her in a man-like, unhelpful manner, which at intervals took the form of scolding. Why didn't she look after herself better? What was the use of leaving Port Victoria before she was quite strong? Why would she nurse the baby when she knew that she wasn't fit for it? On the last point he waxed persistently wrathful.

"I wanted to," pleaded Clare. "I think—I have read that mothers always care more for the children they nurse themselves. It's an outlet for——" She stopped.

"An outlet for what?"

"For the foolish fancies, perhaps, that you have been scolding me for."

"What has put the notion into your head?" asked Tregaskiss. "You know that the child drags you to pieces."

"I didn't nurse the other two," she said, in a low voice, "and they died; and I don't think I was half sorry enough—poor little things!"

Tregaskiss was silent. "That's nonsense!" he said presently. "They wouldn't have lived, anyhow, and this one is much more likely to thrive on good cow's milk. I'll have a milker kept apart." And then he went on: "You talk of expenses, and you know it means gallons of bottled stout, or you can't get on at all. Not that I grudge it," he added hastily, smitten by an expression which crossed Clare's face, "but goodness knows how long the drays will be getting it up. That's what I meant."

But she had been moved many times to a half-amused scorn, or pitiful tolerance, by the exhibition of a curious strain of meanness in Tregaskiss' character. This was all the more strange because it was allied in a certain sense to boisterous good-nature. In some matters Tregaskiss was open-handed and even extravagant; it was quite certain also that he would not have grudged his wife anything that he seriously believed would contribute to her health or comfort, and yet in such small, odd ways he was penurious.

CHAPTER IV.

THE STORY OF CLARE GARDYNE.

Clare Tregaskiss did not love her husband. There are millions of women in like state to whom such a condition of things presents no insuperable barrier to content, or even to happiness. But Clare was not one of these. She had not the disposition to be satisfied with compromises.

To her, life without sympathy seemed poisoned at its source. All she did, thought, and said was robbed of savour and spontaneity. She suffered the pain of a keenly sensitive, emotional, and intellectual woman imprisoned, as within brick walls, by limitations of circumstance. Worst of all she suffered from a dense and stifling materialism—the temperament with which she was mated.

Existence was for her an unfulfilled yearning. Beneath her still, chiselled features, her faint abstracted smile, her painstaking interest in the prosaic details of a squatter's vocation, her scrupulous attention to the duties of her position, her quiet manner and feminine submissiveness to the inevitable, there pulsed a hidden current of passionate feeling: of indignant protest, of unexplainable aversions, impulses, desires, which at times frightened her by their intensity. She did her very best to quell them and to compress her aspirations within the scope of her everyday life, but it was of little use. She ached with an immense craving—an ache insistent and unbearable almost as that of bodily starvation. And in truth, on the psychological side of things, there is a hunger of mind, of heart, and of

spirit, quite as wasting, and quite as imperious in its demands, as the physical need of meat and bread.

Why had she married Mr. Tregaskiss? Oh, fool, fool, fool! This she said to herself over and over again in her fiercest and most secret moods of revolt. But the recognition of her folly did not alter the irrevocable and disastrous fact that she was Keith Tregaskiss' wife and the mother of his children. How she had brought herself to perpetrate the folly was as great a mystery to herself as it became a little while later to Dr. Geneste.

In the chain of circumstances, she had been led to the marriage by perhaps the only concatenation of influences of which it could rationally have been the outcome. Clare Gardyne was the only child of a man who, for a very short time, had blazed as a minor comet in the system of Australian finance. He had been in the first instance a sheep-owner on the Ubi Downs, where Clare had been born and where her mother had died. The child had been about six years old when she was left motherless, and at this time Mr. Gardyne sold his station, realised a moderate fortune, and took his little girl to England. There he made arrangements for her education. He spent the twelve years which this occupied mainly in Australia, where he entered political life, started a great meat preserving establishment, and made for himself a not altogether untarnished reputation as a supposed millionaire and juggler in company promoting, and in the transaction of an important loan to the Leichardt's Land Government. Finally he accepted the appointment of agent-general for the colony, and settled in London in a big house in Queen's Gate, with his handsome daughter to act as its mistress, and as hostess at the numerous entertainments by means of which he floated himself in a certain sphere of society.

Meanwhile Clare Gardyne had been brought up perhaps not altogether in the most judicious manner for a nature so wilful, impulsive, reserved, and impatient of shams and

of control. Her only relatives in England were a sister and brother-in-law of her father's, and from the beginning Clare had entertained for her uncle and aunt the strongest antipathy. They belonged to a class which she imagined beneath her own, and which was, at any rate, utterly opposed to all the traditions of her early Australian associations—for which she had retained an almost passionate tenderness. Mr. Marrable owned a shoe factory in a Midland town. He was a Dissenter, and Mrs. Marrable was not visited by any lady of higher social grade than the wife of the lawyer, the doctor, and occasionally the vicaress of the parish. Yet she had kept an almost sycophantic awe of the great, and her main ambition was to be genteel. The Marrables' way of living and thinking were of the narrowest, dullest, and most provincial. They occupied a two-storied, bow-windowed house of the suburban pattern, in the new road where the principal townsfolk and better-class tradesmen had detached residences. The house had a few shrubs, a miniature rockery, and an oval flower bed in front, and at the back a tennis ground enclosed by a brick wall, and some neatly trimmed shrubs. Clare remembered the wild beauty and expanse of the Ubi Downs, the breezy freedom, the absence of social barriers, the chivalrous deference of the station hands, among whom, even at six years old, she had been a little queen. From these idealised recollections she constructed a visionary republic of light and sincere living, and rebelled against the Marrable restraints. She spent three summer holidays with her relations, then wrote to her father requesting permission to remain at school or to accept invitations elsewhere—a permission he readily granted, for he had ambitions which did not embrace the Marrable connections, and, in truth, cared very little what his daughter did as long as she got into no scrapes and was decently educated. He therefore never opposed any scheme of hers which did not appear to him unreasonable.

Besides, he had his own affairs to think about. When Clare was sixteen she conceived a vague enthusiasm for the artistic life, and went to live in Kensington, in the remoter quarters, where she boarded with the family of one of her school-fellows. The father of her school-fellow was a dramatic critic on the staff of one or two small papers, and the mother called herself an artist, and had a class of young-lady students in her studio, to whom she imparted instruction on impressionist methods. The eldest daughter did a small trade in casting horoscopes and delineating character from handwriting; and of the younger daughters, one was an actress, low in the scale, one studied music, and one was beautiful, ambitious, original, and vague both in her views and occupations.

The first three had great theories, talked much, and were generally unkempt, slip-shod, enthusiastic, and inaccurate in accounts. Clare, at the first blush, had been fascinated at the idea of women breaking loose from conventions, had taken in greedily all the fine talk, had believed in the unappreciated geniuses and the jargon of idealism, had considered the whole thing very intellectual, mystic, original, and elevating. She had a notion that she was going to lead the higher life, and for a time muddled away at her paints—she had a failing for colour—with the utmost satisfaction. She would not allow herself to realise that she had no talent, not even the most rudimentary knowledge of anatomy or perspective, and was readily persuaded that she might become the leader of a movement and the pioneer of advanced womanhood. She had always maintained that women were down-trodden and the victims of an hereditary tendency to insincerity, for the reason that they had never been able to get their own way except by wheedling the men. At this period—she was going on for eighteen—she had an intense scorn for matrimony, and had never seen the man who could raise her opinion of the sex. This was to the credit of her

discrimation, for certainly she saw but poor specimens at the Warrakers. All her emotional force was expended on abstract enthusiasms and upon her friendship for Gladys Warraker, the only one of the sisters who had no profession, and yet who managed to do everything better than any of the others. Gladys, though she was intensely artistic in appearance and nature, kept an attitude of cynical superiority to all artistic fads, and openly scorned the deceptions which the others glossed over by tall talk. She also frankly declared her intention of making a worldly marriage, if the sacramental marriage did not come in her way. This was the point upon which Gladys and Clare were totally disagreed, and many was the tussle they had on the subject. On one point, however, they were in accord. They were each solemnly convinced that the sacramental marriage did exist, only Gladys held that it was irreconcilable with the exigencies of the modern social system. To both girls love was a mystery, as holy and as impossible of frivolous discussion as the mystery of the Eucharist. Gladys was a Catholic ; Clare, having begun doubt with "The Old Red Sandstone," and having wandered on by way of Spencer, Frederic Harrison, Renan's "Vie de Jesus," and Matthew Arnold's "Literature and Dogma," through a phase of tempered agnosticism, was also a somewhat lukewarm votary of the older faith. Gladys accepted the sacramental theory in hope, but was quite ready to resign it as a practical reality at the age of twenty-one, and to do her duty on the material matrimonial plane if the spiritual joys of conjugal life were denied her. Gladys had plenty of common sense ; in this lay her influence over Clare, who was the oddest mixture of romance, sentiment, reserve, as regarded her inner life, and flinty determination to look facts in the face and keep straight at all hazards. It was Gladys who kept Clare at the Warrakers, for she was not many months in discovering that the shifty standards of the rest of the family did

not coincide with her own lofty ideals. She was too innately truthful not to see for herself that their art was only a flimsy pretence, and their impressionism an excuse for slurring honest labour. Had she possessed any real gift she would have gone off on another track, but she was candid enough, after a time, to recognise the fact that she had no gift. She had a brief re-action in the shape of slumming, which, however, did not outlast the discovery of an obnoxious insect upon her clothing after an afternoon among the bandbox makers. She began then to long for some solid social sphere between Bohemianism and squalor and vice. She took a disgust to the queer clairvoyants and mediums and professional fortune-tellers whom the astrological daughter collected, the out-of-elbows literary persons and the dreamy artists, given to ideas and methods that never came to anything, who frequented the Warraker studio. She absolutely longed for a respectability which might be of any type provided it was not that of the Marrables', whom she never saw nowadays. She used to watch the carriages in the Park, when she and Gladys made excursions into that fashionable region, and would dream of a sphere in which influence, enthusiasm, and sincerity might be combined with refinement and the possession of an income. She then began to think that Gladys might have reason in her views, and that it might be better to marry some well intentioned and fairly well-off young man of birth, than to wait for the one and only affinity whom a perverse fate might have located at the other end of the globe. Of course she and Gladys were of the opinion that love in its strict essence was only possible in the event of a falling in with that pre-ordained mate, and the malignant contrariety of the Higher Powers, in so invariably separating the twin souls, seemed to them a problem of the universe on a par with that of the existence of evil. Gladys had a theory, that the allegory of Eve and the apple was a

veiled version of the original mistake in this matter of pairing, which had set the whole machinery out of gear.

Clare knew very little about her father's affairs, and as her allowance had never been munificent, and as in his infrequent letters he had generally spoken of being harassed over money matters, she had come to the conclusion that he was comparatively a poor man. She knew that Australia was supposed to be passing through a cycle of bad years, and imagined that her father was probably suffering therefrom. She very seldom saw him; he was little more than a name to her. When, during his short visits to England, he did run down to Brighton, where she had been at school, it was only on a hurried visit, and he had always seemed oppressed with business, and but perfunctorily interested in her welfare. He had not been to Europe since her installment at the Warraker's, till upon his appointment as agent-general he had come to take her "home." That meant to the house in Queen's Gate, which he had rented furnished from a stock-broker under a cloud, and who was forced to retire for a time to the Continent, and of which he informed her she was to be the nominal mistress. He had already engaged a housekeeper companion, inoffensive and without pretension, who was equally ready to efface herself or to act as Clare's chaperon in the absence of Mr. Gardyne.

Clare was bewildered. The Queen's Gate house appeared to her a palace. The servants in livery, the carriages, the whole style of living, in curious contrast with that of the Warraker's happy-go-lucky establishment, gave her a thrill of power and consequence. She was astonished to find that her father had the reputation of being immensely wealthy, and that in a certain section of London society he was considered a person of importance. She fancied that at last her ambition was to be realised, and that she had gained the vantage point for which she had so feverishly longed, from which she might have an outlook upon the

world and choose the position best suited to her temperament and capabilities. She was only eighteen, and she had all the ignorant self-confidence of the young, clever girl, with a vast amount of emotional steam to let forth, and a very definite reserve force of character underneath. One thing she was almost certain of. Gladys was right; and it was of no use waiting for the Holy Grail—the divine mystery of love—to be revealed to her in this rush and hurry of everyday life. Better marry for position and influence and opportunity of tasting the sweets of human drama, and enshrine her ideal in an inner holy of holies—a standard probably as unrealisable in the practical sense as the typical Christian standard is unrealisable under present-day conventions, but with which her life must be better and purer, just as the world must be better for an example of strict morality, however impossible of actual attainment!

And then her father was always impressing upon her that she might not continue always to enjoy these advantages; that his life was uncertain, his income, notwithstanding the extravagant reports which he encouraged concerning it, precarious; that, in short, it would be well for her to secure herself by a good marriage against the caprices of Fate.

For two seasons she sailed upon a sunlit stream of pleasure. She was presented at one of the Drawing-rooms by the wife of the Secretary of State for the Colonies, and was asked out a good deal, going with her father to the formal receptions of those smart ladies whose husbands or connections were interested in the financial or political affairs of Australia, and to the houses of less fashionable people of different grades of importance, from colonial magnates in London to City people with whom her father appeared to be on terms of business intimacy. The smart entertainments, as far as her personal part in them went, she found dull; but interesting to watch, because of the glitter

of diamonds and orders, and the glimpses they gave her of a sphere to which, she was shrewd enough to see, she was only admitted on the baldest sufferance. The other parties were more amusing, because at them she found herself less of a nobody, but at the same time her very success jarred against the searching and inflexible candour of her nature, which made her intolerant, almost to loathing, of what was false and meretricious. She began to see that she was sought after because she was believed to be an heiress, and she saw also that those higher in the social scale despised her father and herself, and were agreeable only in proportion with what they expected to get out of them ; while those lower down fawned upon her for the sake of obtaining a lever to a higher stratum. She discussed the situation with Gladys Warraker, who in her way was as clear-headed, but much less romantic, and they agreed that society was pharisaical and self-seeking, and that to find sincerity one must either command or disown it. Then in such moods Clare would turn in imagination, as the hart to the water brooks, toward the picture memory gave of the untainted freshness of the New World, and would tell herself that there all men were chivalrous, all motives pure ; that in the free forest, amid the healthful influence of nature, communities must be exempt from mean striving, paltry affectation, and the mental obliquity which can see no distinction between truth and seeming. After all, the more solid, brilliant,—in the matter of diamonds, and silver, and gold plate,—and Philistine Queen's Gate circle was only an outstretching of the small, shifty, æsthetic West Kensington sphere : and beyond there was always the larger truth, the unattainable.

So things went on. Mr. Gardyne looked haggard and worried, and it seemed to Clare that at the numerous banquets in Queen's Gate an invisible spectre of Care sat at the board between her father and herself. Then Mr. Gardyne suddenly resigned his appointment as agent-general.

The colonial magnates dropped off in an unaccountable way from Clare's visiting list, and the financial element and a certain seedy, rakish-looking type of aristocracy came more into evidence. It was then that a greater ostentation than at first marked the conduct of the establishment, and also of Mr. Gardyne's speech and bearing. He boasted of his wealth with an openness that made his daughter wince, dispensed patronage with a lofty air, and took to taking more wine at dinner than was quite compatible with a discreet demeanour. It was at this time that the two men who were instrumental in turning the current of Clare Gardyne's destiny came prominently forward among her acquaintances. One of these was Keith Tregaskiss, the man she afterward married ; the other was Sir Walter Chisholm, to whom she became engaged a few weeks after her first introduction to Mr. Tregaskiss.

The two men were a distinct contrast to each other. Sir Walter was young ; he was in a cavalry regiment ; he was good-looking, and he was supposed to be clever. In his way he was rather a *dilettante*, had written some odd, flippant, paradoxical essays on modern culture, and had had a play—which only ran a fortnight—produced at one of the leading London theatres. He was certainly agreeable ; his reputation was no more tarnished than that of many a rather fast London man ; and the stories circulated about him were not of the kind which come to the ears of a young girl out of society. Had he kept a cleaner record, his chances of securing an eligible wife "in society" would probably have been greater. As it was, his hunting-ground was among the outsiders. Two reasons contributed to turn him in the direction of matrimony. One was that he was very poor, and the other that he was considerably under the thumb of his mother, who was determined that he should marry an heiress and redeem the family property and the family name.

He had met Miss Gardyne at the house of a fashionable

lady, whose husband was on a board of directors of which Mr. Gardyne was a member, and who was also nibbling at a company Mr. Gardyne was floating, unwilling to compromise himself till quite assured of the soundness of the venture. Sir Walter was struck by Clare's beauty. He was told that she was an heiress, and Australian fortunes being always a more or less floating quantity, hers was given the full benefit of supposition. Gardyne was reputed a millionaire. Lady Chisholm set herself to verify the rumour, and succeeded in a sufficiently satisfactory manner to warrant her in calling upon Miss Gardyne. Sir Walter did not let the grass grow under his feet; moreover, he was genuinely attracted. Clare was a little dazzled. She had never been in love, and was quite ready to accept her flattered interest in this very handsome and clever young man as a real attachment. A few days together in a foreign hotel, during the Easter vacation, concluded the affair. Three weeks after their return he proposed, and she accepted him.

There was no question of rivalry between him and Mr. Tregaskiss. Tregaskiss was shy. He fell in love, after his fashion, before he had known Clare a week. Had not Sir Walter appeared on the scene he would have asked her to marry him at the first symptom of encouragement. As it was, Sir Walter overawed him. In spite of all poor Clare's fine notions about the Australian spirit of equality, and freedom from snobbism, there was in Tregaskiss just a touch of the *bourgeois* respect for any kind of a title. What Clare took for modest reserve and disinterested chivalry, for she had divined his feelings toward her, was partly due to this sense of inferiority, and partly to the bushman's lack of social training. He took it for granted that Miss Gardyne would prefer to marry a baronet rather than an Australian squatter, and his vanity shrank from the mortification of a refusal. As far as was compatible with a not particularly high order of ability, Tregaskiss

had a robust power of reasoning, and could often seize a point to his advantage. But he made the mistake common to material natures, of making no allowance for the loftier qualities and for the influence of imagination. A logic which grovels with its wings clipped seldom gets a right view of things. It is not improbable that had Tregaskiss pushed his cause boldly at the beginning, Clare, fascinated by her own romantic conceptions of life in the wilds, might have allowed him to capture her fancy before Sir Walter had had time to enchain it. Oddly enough, at that time she found Tregaskiss personally attractive. His Viking physique and the savour in him of nature and of an open air simplicity of manner were all in his favour. He was at this time a muscular young man of six-and-twenty, with the freshness of youth still upon him. No greater contrast could be imagined to the London masher or the Kensington æsthete. He had animal pluck and vigour, and a subdued boisterousness which presented itself as frank daring, restive under the pressure of conventions.

His smile was sweet, his teeth then white, his blue eyes clear and shining. He was one of those men who can put on their garb of polite manners in a drawing-room with a not unbecoming stiffness, but who will doff it with joyful ease when outside the restrictions of civilisation, and it is very difficult to discriminate, in the case of an enthusiastic woman especially, between the gentlemanly instinct which has conquered barbaric associations and the barbaric instinct peeping out from under the mask of social forms. Clare, at any rate, was not acute enough to make the distinction. In Tregaskiss she beheld a sincere and clean-souled embodiment of the primitive and noble forces. She felt a wish, after having engaged herself to Sir Walter, to keep him for a friend, but he drew back, was constrained, faintly resentful, and avoided her society. This was how she found out that he cared for her, and she pitied him.

Her engagement to Sir Walter did not, however, last

many weeks. The crash came with tragic unexpectedness. One evening about nine o'clock a revolver shot echoed through the house in Queen's Gate, and when, some two hours after, Sir Walter brought his *fiancée* and her chaperon home from the theatre, having left her father at his request to smoke a cigar and work off arrears of correspondence, the party were met by the butler, who opened the door with a blanched face. A strange doctor was in the hall, and the news was broken to Clare that her father had blown out his brains.

The cause of the tragedy was known soon enough. A company bubble had burst. There had been nefarious dealings, in which the Leichardt's Land Government was involved. The late agent-general had chosen the shortest way out of the tangle of living.

Clare Gardyne was an orphan, penniless, and branded as the daughter of a scoundrel. The pretty house of cards toppled as though a gust had struck it. Creditors swarmed, friends held aloof; even the Warrakers were cold. Gladys had lately married, according to her theories, and was upon a honeymoon tour through India. Lady Chisholm did not even leave a card of sympathy. Clare heard that she was going about representing herself and her son as victims of the most heinous fraud. A little later Sir Walter wrote, on the eve of a sudden trip to America, stating his deep regret that altered circumstances compelled him to release Miss Gardyne from an engagement which had been entered into upon a misconception, and which, if continued, could only result in misery to both.

So from the fairy princess, upon whom the world had smiled, and at whose feet the handsome prince had knelt, Clare found herself transformed into the outcast beggar maid. Mrs. Marrable came to the rescue. She deemed it her duty to offer her niece a home, and in her shame, desolation, and bewilderment, Clare subdued her horror of the Nonconformist surroundings, and went meekly with

her aunt to the bow-windowed villa in the provincial town.

She was filled with an immeasurable contempt for the heartless time-serving of the people among whom she had lived, and for the tinsel glitter of her London world. And then her woman's pride, her girl's vanity, and something stronger and deeper in her than either, were wounded and bleeding, past cure. She had not really loved Sir Walter, but she had believed that he loved her. Now she despised and hated him. She felt bruised and beaten into one great throe of longing to be done with her past forever. In her passionate revulsion, the picture of Australia, which her fancy had been working up all these years, showed itself as a vision of paradise. When, a month after her father's death, Tregaskiss offered her the key to this paradise, and a means of escape from the stifling Marrable prison, which now seemed more intolerable than even in her childhood, she accepted the offer with hardly a question. She saw Tregaskiss as a lover, true, loyal, strong, disinterested. Had he not been faithful, when the man to whom she had been pledged basely deserted her? In truth, he was at his best in the diffident deference of a genuine affection, and he met her with a certain pitying, yet blunt, air of dominance, quite in consonance with his somewhat masterful nature, which just now gave her a grateful sense of support. Thus he appealed to her most generous impulses. Should she pause cold-bloodedly to analyse her exact sentiments and the due proportions of love and gratitude in her feelings toward him? Should she not rather respond generously, bravely, after the manner in which he had come to her? And what was she? she asked herself; what was her position, what the advantages she could bring to him, that she should exact an overflowing measure of all the heroic qualities?

He was going back to his Western station in three weeks. Business arrangements made it impossible for him to defer

the date. Would she marry him at once and go home with him to her beloved Australia? The "West" was only a name to her. He had told her of great plains, of gidia scrub; had made light of hardships; had painted everything in the most glowing colours. That was a way of Tregaskiss'. One of his mottoes was, "Praise your own, and the world will think well of it." He had given the full count of his thousands of cattle, their probable rate of increase, the confidence which the bank had in him as a man of brains and mettle—he explained that the station had been purchased on terms of mortgage. A few good seasons and he should be a very rich man. He had a notion of entering the legislative assembly. How should she like to be instrumental in forming the destinies of a new country? She snatched at the fancy. That had always been her ambition. And then what might she not do for the rude, honest, magnanimous souls, pining for light and leading, who would be under her influence! She remembered the army of shepherds and shearers on the Ubi. What graces and refinements she would introduce; what sweet, wholesome, earnest living! It was for the moment an intoxicating prospect. How much grander to be the wife of a man like Tregaskiss than the wife of Sir Walter Chisholm, who would make of her a mere link in the chain of an effete civilisation.

That is how she came to marry Keith Tregaskiss.

CHAPTER V.

OVER THE PLAINS.

THE buggy crawled over the interminable desert. The horses were tired, and, with steaming flanks and panting breath, dragged their limbs heavily, roused every now and then by an impatient curse from Tregaskiss and a flick of the whip. He had lashed them mercilessly at the start to punish them for the trouble they had given him, and there were long weals raising their unkempt coats.

"They won't feel much inclined to bolt to-night," he said grimly. At the camping-place they were to find a change of horses, and the black boy who had brought them would take charge of these and drive them slowly homeward. The camping-place, a gidia scrub, which fringed a water-course, was still a blur upon the horizon in front. It was getting toward sundown, and they had been travelling since early morning.

Oh, these desert plains! For miles and miles they stretch, a dreary brown expanse; in summer, scorched, dried up, and glaring; in winter, swept by chill easterly winds. The loose, sandy soil grows the prickly spennifex grass, which has leaves barbed with needle-like points, and long stalks stretching along the ground, and taking root at intervals to put forth more spiky tussocks. Sometimes there are patches of the horrible poison bush, and sometimes a clump of starved gidia trees or of stunted yellow jack. Sometimes there are no trees at all to break the dead level monotony. A belt of scrub in the far distance is as a cloud; and there stands out, silhouetted against the sky, the shape of an animal or the weird-looking out-

line of windmill pump. For in this land of drought, dams and wells abound in all the great stations, and no one dreams of riding on a journey without water-bags hung on the saddle or round the horse's neck. And even so, if the traveller is a bad bushman, as the saying goes, and loses his bearings, the canvas water-bag soon runs dry, and the chances are that some stray stockman or kangaroo hunter will one day, in his wanderings, come across a dried up, mummy-like body, or a bundle of bleached bones, lying among the spennifex bushes or under a gidia tree.

When first Clare had come to the Leura country—in a dry season—she used to stare in astonishment at hearing her husband and the black boys and stockmen talk of "crossing the water-course," or of "following up the creek"; for she could see no sign of water or creek-bed, only perhaps a few grass-grown holes far apart and with no visible connection. But it was explained to her that these dry holes were the "creek." And one rainless day, when there had been no sign of moisture in the heavens, she beheld a miracle in the shape of a wide, roaring, rushing river pouring its flood over the scorched grass and parched sand, and was told that the creek had "come down," because of a great thunderstorm at the heads, and that they must turn back or else swim the horses. This miracle, however, had not happened for two years.

The buggy was of American build, with two seats and a rough framework supporting a covering of oil-cloth. Clare and her husband were in front, and Claribel, the half-caste, sat behind with Ning, while the baby was cradled by turns in the arms of its mother and its nurse. The insects, the heat, and the uneven progress of the buggy fretted the poor little creature, and its moans irritated Tregaskiss. Ning was tired and cross, too, and as Clare, with throbbing head, aching back, and tired arms, tried to soothe first one child and now the other, she had a

grotesque fancy, in moments of dulled consciousness, that this was some sort of purgatorial torture she was going through ; and when her husband, startled by the odd sound of the laugh with which she pulled herself together, asked what she was thinking of, answered :

"Oh, only that it was a pity Dante never came to the Never-Never country ! "

"Good Lord ! " Tregaskiss ejaculated contemptuously, and whipped on the horses, not thinking it worth while to pursue the subject further. Presently, however, as he turned suddenly, fancying the whip had flicked her, he was struck by her extreme pallor and a curious dazed look in her face. She caught at the rail of the buggy. "Please hold baby steady on my lap," she murmured.

Tregaskiss hastily shifted the reins and clasped the child, while she slowly straightened herself. "What is it ? You're not going to faint ! Hold hard a moment, I'll get you a nip of brandy."

"No, no ; this is better ! "

She fumbled in her pocket, shakily producing a small bottle and medicine glass, and succeeded in pouring out and swallowing some of the mixture before the blackness, which was beginning to rise, had blotted out everything in front of her. The dose immediately revived her, sending a little shock through her body, and for a moment or two causing her heart to beat violently.

"What is it ?" Tregaskiss asked.

"Nitro-glycerine, I think. Dr. Geneste gave it to me."

"Geneste ! " cried Tregaskiss, pulling up and looking at her thoroughly alarmed. "Old dear, it's nothing but being done up, is it ? Nitro-glycerine ! Geneste ! " he exclaimed. "Where on earth did you pick him up ? "

"I forgot—I didn't tell you I fainted—or something yesterday, and Mrs. Ruffey brought him in to see me."

"Fainted ! And you never said a word to me about it ! How should I have known you weren't up to the journey,

which is evident enough. I might have spelled a day at Cedar Hill. But you will always make d——d mysteries. Well, if you choose to kill yourself, it's your own look-out."

Tregaskiss' genuine concern vented itself in anger. Clare deprecatingly protested. "It was nothing. She hadn't wanted to delay him. There was really no need to worry over a fainting fit. Numbers of people fainted——"

"Why, I dare say! But you do always make d——d mysteries, especially about anything that upsets you. What's the good? That's not my way. If I'm upset I let 'em know it."

This was certainly the case. Over the minor ills of life Tregaskiss blustered. Clare, anxious to credit him with the higher qualities, forced herself to believe that under some great misfortune he might display an unsuspected heroism. She laughed nervously, and again declared that "it was nothing."

"Nitro-glycerine!" Tregaskiss resumed. "Who ever heard of such a thing? I'll back against it good old honest 'Three Stars.' That's what I'm going to give you."

He threw down the reins and rummaged in one of the bags at his feet for an iron cup. The brandy he poured from a flask that he carried in his pouch. Then he swore at the black boy, who was riding ahead with the pack-horse, for going out of hearing, and bade him unstrap and fetch the water-bag that was slung to the back of the buggy. He scolded the half-caste nurse, too, for not having taken the baby from her mistress, and passed the infant over the back of the seat, so it awoke and cried. He made Clare swallow a strong dose of the brandy, drank some himself, ordered Tommy George to push on to The Grave, unload the pack and prepare the camp, and finally lashed the tired horses into a feeble trot, which brought them to the camping-place as the sun was setting.

The Grave was a grassy pocket between a gidia scrub

and a shallow creek, now a bed of dry sand. It had its name from a long narrow mound under an iron-bark green tree, and an inscription rudely cut in the bark, which told that here a shepherd was buried. Vegetation was comparatively luxuriant along the water-course. The coolabah trees were more leafy, and an undergrowth of tall grass tussocks and low shrubs spread on each side of the broad sandy bed. Tommy George and his fellow black boy had hobbled the pack-horses and were rigging the tent, and the fresh relay of buggy horses, under the charge of a third black boy, had arrived, and were grazing with bells round their necks. Behind rose the dense gidia scrub, interspersed with green trees and sandal-wood bushes, which in this Leura country alternates with the vast stretches of plain. The gidia here grew to a greater height than in the starved, sickly clumps which were dotted about the desert flat. They are strange, melancholy trees, with stiff hard leaves of a moonlight gray, and straight black trunks that give them the appearance of being in mourning. Clare did not dislike the gidia scrubs. Though they were so different from the luxuriant jungle-like scrubs of the Ubi which were associated with her girlhood, and of which she had kept a glorified recollection, they had a weird beauty of their own, which, in certain moods of hers, exercised a soothing effect upon the nerves. She liked the curious moaning sound that the wind made in the wiry leaves, and then the faint sweet scent of the sandal-wood growing among the gidia roused dreamy fancies, and was peculiarly agreeable to her. There were still some blossoms left, though it was late November, and the sandal-wood blooms in early spring.

It was a relief to get out of the buggy and stretch cramped limbs. The grim purgatorial fancy had vanished. The camp fire showed a scene of homely wildness. Tiny flying things were about, but the black boys had piled green brambles, which made a column of smoke, and in its

shadow there was a freedom from the mosquitoes, whose hum mingled with the strange buzz of insect life that after sundown haunts the bush. It is at this hour that the flights of parrots and cockatoos end ; and the harsh cicadæ whirrings and shrill chatterings and screechings of the day are hushed. Then the wallabies and opossums and scrub creatures come forth, and the dingoes start their dreary howl.

Clare took the baby again, and the wee hungry thing, fed and appeased, opened its eyes and crowed, while Claribel helped the black boys, and Tregaskiss unharnessed the horses and got out rugs and provisions. Tommy George with a tomahawk cleared the ground under the tent of gidia tufts and prickly twigs, and strewed it with leaves, over which Claribel spread a blanket. Ning forgot her fretfulness for a little while in the excitement of the preparations, but presently whined :

"Cobbon, mine thirsty. Daddy, where me find water? Mine no find water."

Mrs. Tregaskiss explored the dried bed of the creek and then echoed Ning's cry. "What are we going to do for water? The bags are empty."

"It's all right," said Tregaskiss curtly. "You are not much of a bushwoman, after all. Ask the black boys."

Tommy George grinned. "No fear, missus. Plenty water. Sit down along a creek." And then he dug a hole in the sand, and to Ning's delight the hole slowly became a little pool, as water bubbled up from below. The tin "billy" was filled and set on the fire to boil ; the salt beef and bread and pickles, and a pot of jam Mrs. Ruffey had put up for Ning, spread out ; the quart-pot of tea was made, and the travellers ate and were refreshed. After tea, the water-hole was widened for the horses to drink, and they, contented, hobbled to pasture, their bells tinkling as they moved. Tregaskiss lit his pipe and stretched himself with his head on a valise ; the black boys gathered round

their own fire. Baby and Ning were given a sort of bath in a tin dish, and by-and-by laid to sleep among the blankets on their bed of leaves, with Claribel keeping drowsy guard.

Clare too lay down at the entrance to the tent. She could not bear to be within. She wanted to feel the vast heavens over her—the wide world around her; wanted to yield herself without hindrance to the strange fascination of night in the Australian bush.

The moon, not yet full, threw ghostly shadows, and the grass tussocks and spinnifex bushes took grotesque shapes. There was a faint aromatic scent in the air. Life seemed to breathe in every leaf, to lurk in the dimness everywhere, and yet the sense of loneliness was overpowering. The bells had grown fainter, but the insect hum had intensified, and through it she could hear the "hop-hop" of wallabies, and now and then a crashing of underwood far off in the scrub, as some wild cattle made their way out. The blacks were still chattering, but Tregaskiss, his pipe between his teeth, was huddled in his blanket, and might have been asleep, but for an occasional muttered oath and slap at a tormenting mosquito. He roused for a moment to swear at the black boys and shout: "Give those horses there a shoot back. Can't you hear Priam's bell working off? Shorten his hobbles a ring or two. He's a brute to ramble." He rolled over again. Then after a time, "Clare, are you asleep?"

"No, Keith, I can't close my eyes."

"Nor I. D——n the mosquitoes. I don't believe that's Priam's bell, after all. Some bullock-drovers, perhaps, camped in the other pocket. Pickaninny all right?"

"Sleeping soundly." Presently she added, "Keith!"

A snore was the answer.

Clare lay broad awake and looked up at the stars, the Southern Cross with its pointers unperceptibly mounting; the Pleiades; the Magellan clouds; and Venus had risen

over the tops of the trees so brilliant that she seemed to throw forth a defined ray of light; and after her Mars had become visible. There were all the wonderful southern constellations, so familiar to Clare that she might have known them for centuries. And yet, during the most impressionable years of her life she had lived under northern stars, and had studied them as illustrations, when she had learned astronomy from the celestial globes in the schoolroom. She tried now to recall the Great Bear and Charles' Wain and the rest, but they were a blur, and her mind refused to make any map of them. Odd! For she knew that if she were to go away toward the North Pole, and live there to be a hundred, and never see Aldebaran and the Scorpion and the Southern Cross again, they would be as clear to her mind's eye at her dying day as they were to her bodily eyes this night. Well, perhaps *she had* known those stars centuries ago, and in some long dead existence had steered by them, dreamed beneath them. Perhaps it was the vague striving in her of passionate memories from that richer existence which gave her at times the bursting feeling of yearning and unrest, the terrible dumb straining toward some undefined and wholly unattainable joy. Perhaps, in this cramped, crude life to which she seemed condemned, she was expiating the vices of a too voluptuous or too ambitious past. Her fancy went wandering in conjectures of the mystic sort. During her stay with the Warrakers she had dabbled, as in these days of West Kensington mysticism most imaginative girls do dabble, in the Pythagorean theories.

Gladys Warraker and she had firmly persuaded themselves that they had been friends, sisters, in a former phase of development. They had revelled in the notion that their affinities dated back to the early Pharaohs, for which civilisation they had entertained a strong predilection. They declared to each other that it explained their idiosyncrasies. To be sure, Gladys, unlike Clare, bore no relation

to the Sphinx type, but Gladys confessed to cravings toward the Greek, and Philhellenism on the part of the Pharaohs was almost prehistoric, and quite satisfactory in the way of argument. Oh, of course they must have all lived before! As Clare gazed into the immensity of space, she seemed to read in the stars proof of her conviction. And if she had lived before, and had known Gladys, she must have known others. Her husband! Clare shuddered. Must they two go on, drawn together by some mysterious attraction, for ever and ever in the cycle of Fate, or might she hope, by patient submission in this life, for freedom in future ages. It was a horrible thought that she must be bound for æons upon æons to that uncongenial companionship. As she lay she could hear Tregaskiss' stertorous breathing: it affected her, even at this distance, with a distinct sense of repulsion, and caused her to shrink within the circle of herself, so to speak, so that she might make a kind of spiritual barrier, which would prevent the two atmospheres from mingling. What had her husband been to her in the life that was gone? Somehow he fitted into the picture, and her fancy readily placed him amid semi-barbaric associations. A fighting, conquering, riotous-living, mail-clad, woman-loving hero—perhaps one of the Trojan set, or a Berserker maybe. She was getting mixed in her chronology and laughed to herself. She had never had any faculty for dates.

Tregaskiss' snores became louder. The black boys were now lying like mummies, rolled in their blankets. Suddenly the dingoes in the scrub behind set up a prolonged and most grewsome howling. Clare was familiar enough with the dismal howl, which, even when she heard it in her bedroom at Mount Wombo, made her shudder. But here in the wild it afflicted her with an eerie, indescribable horror. She was not frightened,—of course she knew that dingoes are not creatures to be frightened of,—but the wailing got on her nerves, and when the curlews joined in

with their miserable shriek, she could endure no longer to lie still and listen, but got up and wandered away from the camp, finding relief in movement. She had at all times a tendency to sleeplessness, and would often at home steal out in the starlight or moonlight and pace the bank of the lagoon, feeling a certain satisfaction in being thus alone with nature.

To-night she walked out of sight of the camp, round the bend of the creek and along the broad shallow water-course. Presently she got into a sparsely wooded pocket, mostly grown with the mournful coolabah, or flooded gum, which in the moonlight looked peculiarly dank and desolate. Clare thought that the buggy horses must all have strayed here, the tinkling of the bells was so distinct and frequent. Then as she got near a belt of gidia, which seemed to bound the pocket, she became aware of a different sound beyond—the stir and confused night bellow of a small mob of cattle, and the regular patrol of a mounted stockman keeping the beasts from breaking. The belt of gidia narrowed down from the scrub to the water-course, and at the point was a clump of big gum trees, that she thought must shadow a landslip and lower plateau, for she could see the smoke and reflection of a camp-fire rising, it appeared, from several feet below. As she approached the gums more closely and finally crouched down behind the trunk of the largest, Clare could hear the voices of men camped round the fire.

CHAPTER VI.

HOW LONG! HOW LONG!

It was the usual camp talk; she had heard the same sort of thing before. From it she gleaned that the party consisted of a gentleman drover, a stockman, and a young "hand" or two, who were taking down fat cattle to Port Victoria.

Somebody said:

"I suppose you know that you're a 'scab,' Peter. That's what you're called, isn't it, when you throw up the union?"

"Scab or blackleg—I dun-now; I aint on the strike any more now."

"Well, you're not a shearer, Peter, anyhow, so what were *you* striking for?"

"I dun-now. When I went to Ilgandah with my mate, he went on strike: and Jem Dowlan comes up to me, and I had to give him ten shillings, and then he guv me a ticket. I dun-now what they were all doing; but we camped out on the creek, and they used to give us a stick of tobacco every other day. Then the man that owned the strike said he had no more money, and then a chap gets up and says those can go and get work that wants; and those that don't want can fight to the bitter end and ruin the squatters and drag Leichardt's Land down with them. And then we gives the chap three cheers. That's all I know about it; but I bet there'll be a jolly row before next shearing time. And I know I was jolly full of it; and anyway, I've sacked the union and tore up my ticket."

The late striker who had delivered his opinions appeared

to have moved away. Clare leaned over round the trunk of the gum tree. She could see what seemed to be a further camp-fire, with four black boys playing euchre a little way from it. The striker had drifted toward them, and she could hear his voice saying, "Take it up," as he joined the game. She recognised him as an undersized, vicious, unhealthy-looking lout, a waif whom Tregaskiss had kept for a few months on Mount Wombo and had dismissed for theft.

"It's a fine union to be made up of things like that," said a voice which caused Mrs. Tregaskiss to start. "That boy knows nothing about a union; and the man who owns it, and whom they were cheering, is Kelso, the labour delegate—one of the greatest scoundrels unhung. What fools they all are!"

The voice was that of Geneste; it resumed: "I shall go and have a look round the mob, boys, before I turn in. Daybreak sharp, to-morrow, for my start. Lucky I hit your camp. I should advise you to keep a close watch to-night. A cattle smash in a brigalow scrub is no joke. These Darra beasts are a wild lot. Hand me over the tobacco pouch, Micklethwaite, will you, and a firestick?"

Clare crept closer to the edge of the landslip, and craned forward over the bristling herbage and rank grass that screened the drop. She saw now a nearer camp-fire, right under the shadow of the bank, which was steeper than she had supposed. The gentleman drover, Micklethwaite, whom she recognised also as having come over once from Cyrus Chance's station to Mount Wombo, was leaning back against his saddle and a roll of blankets, placidly smoking. One of the stockmen was on his knees mixing and kneading the flour for next day's damper on a canvas baking-board. A "billy" of tea simmered in the ashes; and there was a larger billy in which salt junk was boiling. On a flour bag a little way off were spread the remains of the evening's meal. Two other men sprawled

on their blankets smoking and cursing the heat, the insects, and the necessity of sitting well into the smoke of the fire, in order to escape from the mosquitoes.

Somebody remarked that the clouds had cleared off, and Geneste said: "I don't like this weather; it looks to me as if there would be a long drought. By the way, have you seen anything of the Mount Wombo people to-day, on their way up?"

"Tresgaskiss? No. Shouldn't wonder if he was camping in the other pocket. Peter said he heard horse-bells. Somebody told me he was bringing up his wife. Poor woman!"

Geneste went on scraping his pipe, and did not speak. He sat down on a fallen tree and tapped his pipe against the bark. The firelight illumined his clean-cut face, and showed lines of determination about the mouth. Clare liked the face; she liked him for taking no notice of the allusion to herself. How dare these men pity her!

Micklethwaite went on:

"It beats me how a lady brought up in England can go on leading the life she does. And how a man can stand by and see his wife roughing it in such a God-forsaken hole, knowing that he had brought her from luxury to—*that*, and not want to cut his throat or go on his knees and beg her pardon, is more than I can understand."

Still Dr. Geneste said nothing.

"I call it a downright sin," contined Micklethwaite. "And when he is a little 'on,' he isn't decently civil to her. I saw her wince the night I was there; and there was a butcher at the table who ought to have been at the huts; and her husband chaffing and cheapening her before him in his rough way. By Jove! if I had a wife as handsome as Mrs. Tregaskiss, I'd treat her like a queen, and I'd see that all other fellows did the same. Upon my soul! I pity a woman under those conditions. It's enough to make her hook it with another chap—only there isn't any-

body up here worth her while to hook it with. What do you say, doctor?"

"That I prefer not to bring a lady's name into camp discussion." Geneste's tone suggested a flint giving sparks. "Thanks!" He stretched over for the firestick which Micklethwaite had been brandishing, lighted his pipe, rose, and stepped out of Clare's sight.

"Well, that's a facer," murmured Micklethwaite to himself; "but I'm hanged if I didn't deserve it." And he got up uncomfortably, and went over to where the black boys were playing.

The stockman, who had kneaded his dough into a cake, whistled, and shifted the blazing logs apart, leaving a glowing bed, in which he scooped a hollow, placing the dough therein, and covering it carefully with ashes.

"Here, one of you fellows! I'm going to round up the horses. Look after the fire for me," he called out. "The damper is in the ashes."

"And damn-poor it will be when it comes out," said one of the other men, making the regulation camp joke.

Clare, hot and trembling with indignation, had drawn back against the gum tree. She hated Micklethwaite—unreasonably, perhaps. At the moment she hated her husband, with greater justification. It was he, she told herself, who had subjected her to this humiliation. At least Dr. Geneste was a gentleman. This was the most coherent thought that framed itself. She got up, and ran as swiftly and quietly as she could away from the gum clump and down toward the river bed. Tears blinded her. She ran till she was out of hearing of the men's laughter and the black boys' voices calling over their game. Then she stood still, and stretched out her arms in a tragic gesture that was a revelation of the pent force of passion in her. A revelation, indeed, to the man who had been impressed by her stoic resignation that afternoon, and who could not have imagined it possible for her face to be transformed

as the moonlight now showed it. Geneste was close to her, but she did not see him.

It seemed natural that her emotion should express itself in Biblical phrase.

"How long, oh, my God, how long!" she said, almost in a whisper, but so clearly and with such intensity of emotion that each syllable fell sharply upon his ears through the howling of the dingoes in the scrub. She looked up with great despairing eyes to the star-studded space above, and then out upon the vast lonely bush showing where the belt of scrub broke, a vista of desolate plain. The world seemed open to her, and she might escape now, this very night, unchecked, with pitying nature's mantle spread out to hide her from pursuit. Practically, she was as free as the kangaroo or the wild dog. And yet—yet she stood, a wretched human, chained by moral responsibility, as tightly as though her limbs were bound with iron.

"How long! how long!" she repeated, this time louder. The expression of her face spoke the answer to her question; that despairing formula, "Till death us do part." Instinctively, Geneste felt that this was the thought which shaped itself on her lips. He had never heard it suggested, until Micklethwaite made his careless remark, that her marriage was not a happy one; but he knew now, as surely as if she had laid bare her inner life to him, that she was miserably mated.

Her arms had dropped to her side, and her form, momentarily expanded in her passion, collapsed. The turning inward, as it were, of that wild, outward gaze,—yearning, he fancied, for the breath of ocean and of liberty,—seemed to him like the hopeless glance back of a captive from blue sky, glimpsed through a prison grating, to the pallet bed and blank walls of a condemned cell. She was mentally scanning her cell—the tent, not quarter of a mile distant, in which lay her sleeping children.

She pulled herself together and moved mechanically

homeward, coming down toward the river bed and to where Geneste was standing in the shadow of a gum tree. A cattle track ran along the creek side, bare and clear in the moonlight. Across it, a yard from her feet, lay a blunt brown thing like a bit of dead wood or a shred of bark. She would probably have trodden upon it, had not a voice called out sharply, but quite steadily :

"Step back ! It's all right—only a snake in front of you."

She retreated sideways, and with a great start found herself almost touching Dr. Geneste, who had removed his pipe with one hand, and held the other outstretched. Clare laughed hysterically, a weakness unusual with her.

"Oh ! it's—you ! " she exclaimed.

"Yes. Stop a moment ; I must have that brute."

He looked round, and picked up a short thick stick, with which he struck the adder a blow on its flat head. The reptile was sluggish, as is its way, and did not try to escape. After a moment or two he pronounced that it was "done for."

"Lucky it was on the track, and not in the grass. They make for clear spaces. You ought to be careful, Mrs. Tregaskiss. The Grave has got a regular name for death adders, and snakes are pretty spry at this time of the year. Did I startle you ? You are trembling."

"Oh, no ! Thank you for calling out." She mastered herself, and spoke evenly.

"Funny, our running across each other like this. Do you often take midnight strolls ? "

"Sometimes, when I can't sleep, I go and sit down among the gidia trees by the lagoon. It is cool there. To-night in the tent it was so hot—and the mosquitoes, and the native dogs. Did you ever hear them make so much noise ? "

"Yes, often. It is an infernal howling. But I can't say I dislike it. It had a sort of fascination for me when

I first began camping out. There was something barbaric and unfettered in the association of ideas. One couldn't have a stronger contrast to the London night noises: that awful empty roll of returning carriages, and the like—a kind of hollow social echo of the preacher's refrain 'vanity of vanities.'"

He had talked on, mostly in the nervous effort to cover a disagreeable suggestion. Had she heard Mickleth waite's tactless comments upon her supposed matrimonial infelicity?

"Oh!" she cried; "you know all about that, too?"

"Too?" he repeated. "So you, as well as I, have revolted from civilisation?"

"If you call it revolting——"

"To marry an Australian squatter and come to the Never-Never country. Are you happy here on the Leura, Mrs. Tregaskiss?"

The moment he spoke he repented the question which had escaped him out of the perverse working of things, as one laughs on solemn occasions from the sheer strain of enforced decorum, and which seemed an ironic allusion to the despairing abandonment he had witnessed.

He fancied in the moonlight that she reddened.

"Happy!" she repeated, with an involuntarily bitter emphasis. Her tone was that of roused resentment, and she turned on him eyes that flashed. The mild moon rays revealed the flash.

"I beg your pardon," he said, involuntarily also. "I know what you are thinking, but I assure you—— It wasn't out of impertinent curiosity that I said what I did."

"No—I understand how it came out. One says things like that, and then one feels directly afterward that they were tactless. I winced because—— Oh, I dare say you understand too. Of course when I cried out in that stupid way, I had no idea that you were close to me."

"I am very sorry. I had strolled away from the camp.

I wanted to look at the mob. Yes, I know ; I saw you, and your expression arrested—moved me infinitely."

She made a gesture as if to deprecate his pity. "I owe you thanks. You at any rate acted like a gentleman. I am much obliged to you for not allowing me to be discussed by—your stockmen."

"Mickleth waite spoke thoughtlessly. He is rather a cad in some of his notions, and wants to be pulled up now and then."

"Oh, I remember when he came over to Mount Wombo. He took pains to impress upon me that he had an extended knowledge of English society. But like a good many of the Englishmen who come West, he forgets the English code of manners, and does not adopt the Australian one."

"You are severe, Mrs. Tregaskiss."

"It is because I have suffered—from—from a want of chivalry in a certain class of our visitors."

There was a slight pause. She broke it suddenly.

"What made you revolt from civilisation?"

"Two things. One I will tell you about,—if you would care to hear,—perhaps, some day when we know each other better ; the other was only break down of health. I was threatened with consumption if I did not live in a warm, dry climate."

"That you certainly have on the Leura. But you look very well now."

"I got perfectly well in less than two years. But by that time the passion for exploring had got hold of me. It's as bad as the gold fever."

"I have never explored anything," she said impetuously, "except"— and she hesitated and laughed—"except two phases of life and a few illusions."

"The two phases of life are the English and Australian, aren't they. I suppose you have explored them both pretty thoroughly?"

"I have gone as far as circumstances have taken me, and that isn't a great distance."

"Far enough, anyhow. It seems to have made you a bit of a cynic. Mrs. Tregaskiss, you are too young to have got to the other side of your illusions."

"I am not at all young. I am at the beginning of middle age."

He laughed. "Middle age has its illusions, too, and, since you are beginning it, you should be in the flush of its joys."

"What sort of joys and illusions has middle age?" she said indifferently.

"I think, before I try to fix them, I'll ask you what are the joys and illusions you give the season of youth."

"I said nothing about joys. But, oh, yes—enthusiasm is a joy, I suppose," she answered.

"Enthusiasm? First love, and that sort of thing?"

"I wasn't thinking of love at all, though I have no doubt some girls take flirtation as a serious enjoyment. I was thinking of real enthusiasms—those were my illusions; about books and art and people—people outside the flirting category. Girls are not in a position to know what love means."

"Do *you* know, I wonder?" he mentally interpolated. And then he thought of a girl who came into his mind not seldom at this time, and exclaimed, with a curious frankness:

"I think I could guess at one girl who would know when the real thing came. But the real thing is slow about coming along, as a general rule, I fancy."

Mrs. Tregaskiss made no comment on the interruption, but went on in her deliberate, plaintively modulated voice:

"And there's the grand sort of hope and belief one starts with, and the expectation one has that the world is there to be twisted and kneaded into the shape one wishes, as if it were a bit of dough."

"Now, I'm glad I asked you to place things," he said.

"I should have put them differently. I should have said that first love was the illusion of youth, and art and books the reality of middle age."

"Perhaps that is true. But art may begin in illusion, may it not? I was thinking of Gladys Hilditch."

"Gladys Hilditch?"

"Oh, a friend of mine! a girl who is married now; one of the artist set. Whom were you thinking of?—the other girl, I mean, who would know 'the real thing' when it came along?"

"Of Miss Helen Cusack," he answered.

"You think she is so real in herself that she would know?"

"I think she is very real and simple and sincere."

"Ah! I understand. You mean that she is not complex, that she would accept without analysing, and that when she had once accepted a feeling as real, she would be true to it?"

"You express my thought exactly."

"I shall be more interested now in Helen Cusack," said Mrs. Tregaskiss reflectively. "I looked upon her as a child. I see that you look upon her as a woman."

Again there was a short pause. Then Mrs. Tregaskiss resumed:

"There is no art, and there are very few books, on the Leura."

"I have a great many books at Darra-Darra."

"Have you?" She spoke with some eagerness.

"Perhaps you'll come over and have a look some day. I have lined a room with them. Ramm couldn't understand how anyone could want a bullock-dray load of books. If they had been kegs of rum he would have appreciated the necessity."

"That is quite certain." Once more, he knew by her tone that he had touched a raw spot. "Don't the white ants eat your books? At Mount Wombo they devour every-

thing. They crawl up the walls and eat the brackets and picture frames; they build nests in the storeroom, and eat into the flour, and they scoop out the rafters, and make holes in the cradle; and I shall dream that they are eating baby."

"Oh, come, Mrs. Tregaskiss, that's partly the fault of your station hands; they should keep the posts and slabs fresh tarred. But I can crow over some of your Leura bosses, for I've built myself two stone rooms, and my books are in one of them. That's your camp, I suppose."

They had come within sight of the fires, in the smoke of which Tregaskiss and the black boys slumbered. Clare seemed to hear her husband snore. There was a faint tinkle of horse-bells, too, and of gentle browsing, audible in a lull of the dingoes' howl. The errant Priam and his mates had been driven by the mosquitoes into the circle of smoke. Clare's children were sleeping. All was silence in the tent. She started guiltily.

"I had forgotten my baby," she said, turning to Geneste and holding out her hand. "My husband is asleep, and you must want to get back to your camp and to go to sleep, too, or I would ask you to come and make his acquaintance."

"I can't do anything for you? No, I am not sleepy. But I have to make a very early start to-morrow."

"It must be late—a strange hour, isn't it, for me to be wandering?"

"Strange? yes," he assented absently. "I think everything in life is strange; but the strangest thing which strikes me just now is that, though I took the liberty of doctoring you yesterday, I have not asked how my remedies succeeded. Did the drops do?"

"Oh, very well, thank you! They pulled me together to-day when I was beginning to feel faint and things were growing black. But, never mind about that. It isn't *that* which matters."

"What is it that matters, then? Tell me, Mrs. Tregaskiss. I wish I could help you!"

Something of the tragic passion he had surprised a little while before showed itself in the look she gave him. The look was searching, and had a pained hesitancy, yet she spoke almost with recklessness:

"It matters that I let you see my weakness. Yes, you can help me—this way. Don't betray me."

"Good Heavens!" he exclaimed angrily. "What do you take me for?"

"For a man, like all other men. I don't know you, remember. You may be engaged to Helen Cusack; if not now, you will be, perhaps, by and by. I know how men talk to girls they are going to marry, especially about some older woman in whom the girl is interested. It would be natural enough that you should discuss me together, and that you should speak to her about what you have seen. I have this great favour to ask you, and I am paying a compliment in asking it—don't do so. Instead, forget it."

"What do you take me for?" he said again. "Do you class me with Micklethwaite?"

"No, no! But, oh! stop people when they begin to say the things he said. You don't know how it galls my pride to think of it! And then, for one's neighbours—for the Cusacks—to know, to pity one, perhaps! Besides, Dr. Geneste, it is not true. I am quite happy; I am perfectly contented." She flung out the assertion defiantly. "My life may be rough and dull to outsiders, but I chose it of my own free will. More, even, I chose it thankfully."

"You are a very loyal woman, Mrs. Tregaskiss, and I respect you. That's answer enough, isn't it, to what you ask?"

"I have something more to tell you. Do you know that, when I was disgraced and deserted by my friends and by the man who wanted to marry me, *he* was true—

Keith Tregaskiss? He didn't run away from me; he came forward and offered me everything that he had to offer."

"I did not know," he stammered. "I know nothing of your history, except——"

"Except that I was Clare Gardyne,—that's enough to make it all clear,—and that now I am Clare Tregaskiss. I bear my husband's name with gratitude—yes, gratitude. You would be quite mistaken if you imagined, from what you saw to-night, that I am unhappy."

"No, no!" he exclaimed. "Think me as impertinent as you like for saying it: you challenged me, remember. No, you may tell me as many loyal lies as you think proper, Mrs. Tregaskiss, but you'll never make me believe that you are a happy woman!"

The man's matter of fact sincerity dashed down her weapons and forced her to a reactionary candour.

"It's true. Sometimes I think that I am the most morbidly miserable woman on earth. But I don't give way to it. To-night I couldn't help crying out. I was choking; I was stifled; I was being—*killed*, by the awful dense materialism of everything. I want sympathy; I want soul, spirit, intellect to come and surround me, and breathe a breath of real life into me. And there's *nothing*—nothing but coarse, cruel flesh and blood; beef and mutton; parched, barren ground. Earth—earth! fit only to bury a corpse in. Nothing but everlasting gum tree; everlasting gibia scrub; everlasting dry plain." She stretched out her hands to the forest and the distant level which touched the sky. "It's awful, isn't it? It's horrible—so big, so lonely, and so—*dead!*"

She stopped and stared at him like a trapped thing; and then gave herself a little shake. "Good gracious! what makes me talk like this! You must think me mad!"

"Dear lady, I think you are tired and overstrained, and the Leura has got on your nerves; and your little out-

burst is as natural—and as necessary—as the escape of compressed steam. You'll be all the better for it. As far as I go, you must recollect that I'm a physician, and if I don't understand something about women's nerves, I had no business to go in as specialist for nervous disorders. Perhaps thinking of that will give you a little more confidence in my sympathy, as well as in my discretion."

"Yes, thank you," she answered abruptly, quite recalled to herself. "Good-night, Dr. Geneste!"

"We shall probably fall in with each other on the road to-morrow," he said, "as we are both bound in the same direction. If not, please convey my regrets to Mr. Tregaskiss, and allow me to look forward to a meeting at Mount Wombo."

"Yes; he will be sorry.

"Good-night, then!"

He lifted his hat and moved a step or two, then came back.

"There's something I should like to say, Mrs. Tregaskiss. I will never repeat to living soul what you have said to-night. And—I have not the honour of being engaged to Miss Helen Cusack."

CHAPTER VII.

THE CUSACKS.

Mr. Tregaskiss and his wife did not, upon their next day's journey, fall in with Dr. Geneste. He started at daybreak, and Tregaskiss two or three hours later. The black boys, in getting up the horses, of course at once discovered their neighbours of the night; and Clare was not yet awake from a dull sleep when they came back and informed their master. Tregaskiss hurried off to look at the mob of "fats," and lost some time in discussing bovine matters and Leura gossip with Micklethwaite over a pannikin of tea which had in it more than a dash of cognac. Micklethwaite came up to the buggy camp, in shirt-sleeves and soiled moleskins, to pay his respects, as he stated, to Mrs. Tregaskiss and the new baby. He was disposed to be a little free and easy after his early stimulant, though it must be owned in justice that this was not a frequent indulgence, and Tregaskiss scolded his wife afterward for being stand-off, and for keeping visitors away from Mount Wombo by "confounded dignity."

There was another day's drive which seemed interminable; and the baby fretted and moaned with prickly heat, and Ning was cross, and Tregaskiss swore. On and on, across the dreary plains, under scorching sun, the only relief a belt of scrub; the only life, but their own, a road party, a shepherd, and a man who looked dazed and answered Tregaskiss' greeting with a stupid laugh. He had "gone silly" from sunstroke and was left in charge of a surveyors' camp. Then night under the stars, and water getting low in the canvas bags, so that the children

could not have a bath; and on again the next morning, till toward sundown Brinda Plains station came in sight.

The station—as the seat of the workings was called, in contradistinction to "The House," where the Cusacks lived—was, as is the case on many large sheep properties, a village in itself, with its great woolshed, its store and post office and bachelor's quarters, the men's huts, and cottages of the storekeeper and accountant. Then came a fence with big white gates,—Brinda Plains was the best gated station in the district,—and beyond the gates, The House, an oasis of comfort and luxuriant verdure in the midst of the brown plain, which was like the sea, having island-clumps of trees dotted about, and lily-covered water-hole, making another spot of bright green; and a long, low, dull green line in the near distance marking the creek. The house was low and rambling, mostly of stone, and there were great wide verandas, and many outbuildings, some of which had bough shades, while others were connected with the main structure by gangways, covered with native convolvulus and wild cucumber. There was a beautiful garden, which had water laid on from the water-holes, so that the half-tropical shrubs were green and the flower beds gay. Clumps of bamboos looked like tufts of upright feathers. A bohinia tree, with its large pink flowers, resembled a gigantic azalea shrub in bloom; and an emu apple showed a waning glory of great white blossoms. The coral plant was putting forth its green and giving out only points of red, and the tecoma tree showed branches of brilliant orange bells. There were flowers of all kinds, many fruit trees, and shady grape-trellised walks. It was a beautiful garden, and Clare thought regretfully of her own less luxuriant plot, and wished that they too had windmill-pumps and a staff of gardeners. As the buggy drove past, a set of tennis players dropped their game and looked out from between the pepper trees to see who was coming. The Chinese cook put his white-capped head out

of his window. Mrs. Cusack, who was sitting in the veranda, her basket of mendings beside her, talking to a delicate-looking young woman wrapped in a "cloud," looked up too, and hurried round to the gangway at the back to receive her guests. All Australian houses are approached from the back. She was standing there as Clare got down, a portly, good-looking woman, with a fussy kindliness of manner and a gush of greetings.

"Oh, Mrs. Tregaskiss! And aren't you just dead with the heat? And camping out, too! Dr. Geneste told us. Come right in and you'll have some port wine before you speak a word. And so this is the new baby! Poor little chappie—prickly heat, eh! Oh, it's a girl, is it, Mr. Tregaskiss? Well, I don't know that girls aren't better than boys in Australia, and easier put out in the world, and if they were all only as good to their mother as my Helen! Helen, come along quick and see Mrs. Tregaskiss. You are Helen's admiration, my dear. She is always talking about you. Will, here's Mr. and Mrs. Tregaskiss. Call someone to see to the horses, and you take Mr. Tregaskiss in charge while we look after the chicks."

Mr. Cusack, in a white linen suit, a newspaper in his hand, came round the veranda corner. He was a big, red-faced man, pompous in manner, a brag and a bully.

"How are you, Tregaskiss? These horses of yours look pretty well done up. Congratulate you on the new baby, Mrs. Tregaskiss. But you don't seem the thing exactly. Too much roughing it, I should say. If my wife was in your shoes she'd jib, wouldn't you, Kitty?"

Clare made a faint disclaimer. She was too tired to be resentful.

"Oh, I know what roughing it means," cried Mrs. Cusack; "and I've had plenty of it in my time, and never made so little fuss over it as Mrs. Tregaskiss. I always just quote your wife as a model, Mr. Tregaskiss,—so cheerful and contented. If only all bush wives were like her, as

I say to my Helen. And it isn't as if she hadn't lived in England, and didn't know what good society is ! "

At that moment Helen Cusack appeared. She ran up to Clare with both hands outstretched, and yet something of awe in her greeting. Her mother was right ; she admired Mrs. Tregaskiss immensely. There was none in the world of women, or books, so suggestive of thrilling romance. The women in books were not alive, and Mrs. Tregaskiss not only lived, but gained in dramatic interest from the contrast she presented to her surroundings. Helen was herself quite an embodiment of youthful romance, but of this she was unconscious. She was a shy, sweet, simple-minded creature, with a force of character not apparent on the surface, and a tendency to idealism hardly compatible with a distinctly practical side of her nature. She was excessively pretty, of a gum sapling slenderness and extreme delicacy of complexion,—Mrs. Cusack had never allowed her daughters to go out without gauze veils,—deep, clear blue eyes, and brown hair that had a wave in it and was parted in the middle. She was clever too, and talked with the brightness and ready adaptability of the typical Australian girl ; and if Mrs. Cusack had a trace of snobbism, her daughter was the most perfect little lady which it was possible for nature to produce. Clare looked at her with a quickened interest. An impulse, for which she could not account, made her bend forward and kiss the young girl. "Oh, was I ever young and trustful and happy like that ?" she thought ; "and what will she be like when she marries and has children ?" And then the next thought : "I wonder if she will marry Dr. Geneste ?"

Mr. Cusack made Ning indignant by flicking her cheek, and asking after her friends, the blacks. A golden-haired child, two years older than the Pickaninny, came and took her away. Helen and her mother fussed over Mrs. Tregaskiss, and Helen ran for the port wine.

"Take Mrs. Tregaskiss' hat, Minnie. You *have* got thin,

my dear; but never mind, you must eat a lot while you are spelling here. That's the best remedy—heaps to eat, and a happy mind. Now come to your room and put on a cool gown, and then we'll have a quiet chat about baby."

"Any whiskey out, Kitty?" said Mr. Cusack. "Come along, Tregaskiss, and have a nip. The groom will look after the things."

They took Clare into a cool, stone bedroom. Helen gave her the port wine. Minnie, another golden-haired one, brought in tea; and a third blue-eyed creature a bunch of roses. Presently the Cusack's nurse took possession of the baby; and Ning was escorted to the bathroom, and thence to the children's quarters, and was told that she must on no account bother her mother till bedtime.

Clare lay and dozed. By and by Tregaskiss came in. He was cross; his self-esteem had been wounded, and the signs of prosperity at Brinda Plains irritated him. He declared that Cusack's brag was insufferable, and that if Clare had not been so "done up," and the horses so much in need of a spell, he would start off on the morrow. His grumblings sounded above the noise of his splashings as he washed off the journey's grime. So also did those of two young ladies in a veranda room on the other side, who were quarrelling over a pair of curling tongs, and complaining that it was a downright shame to ask girls over from Ilgandah, and not warn them that there'd be "dressing for dinner."

The bell clanged. Helen Cusack tapped and entered in response to Mrs. Tregaskiss' "Come in." She was already dressed, and looked fresh and fair in her white gown. With all her girlish simplicity, she had a certain seriousness of aspect which, combined with the purity of her limpid eyes and the virginal curves of her face and form, gave her something of the Madonna appearance. She wore an artistic trail of allamanda blossoms, and carried some

of the same flowers in her hand. She thought that perhaps Mrs. Tregaskiss might like allamandas too, better than Totty's roses, which were droopy things; the heat had withered them. And then the allamandas would go so beautifully with Mrs. Tregaskiss' tawny sort of dress. Wasn't that what artists would call a harmony in brown and yellow? Hair and eyes and complexion and dress, and that odd, old-fashioned cross Mrs. Tregaskiss always wore. Oh, it had been her mother's, and were those stones uncut rubies?

She, Helen, always wondered how it was that Mrs. Tregaskiss' dresses, and Mrs. Tregaskiss herself, seemed as if they had come out of a picture. Oh, it must be delightful to be so—so interesting-looking, so different from every other person.

"I am not so interesting as you yourself are," said Clare literally.

"Oh, Mrs. Tregaskiss!" Helen could say no more. The comparison seemed almost sacrilegious. The elder woman was a goddess who had descended to the Leura from an Olympian sphere. In Helen's imagination, the distinction between London society and society in Australia was as that between heaven and earth. "I am only a stupid bush girl," she said. "You can't call me interesting—in the sense that you are interesting."

"My dear, you are very clever, and you are very sweet and very pretty. Isn't that being interesting?" answered Clare. "You are ever so much prettier than I ever was, when I was young."

"Oh, Mrs. Tregaskiss!" Helen repeated; "that is nonsense, you know. Only just before you came, Dr. Geneste said——"

She stopped abruptly, abashed by the sudden dilating of her companion's eyes as they turned upon her. And something which had not occurred to her before, glanced through her mind in a vaguely disturbing way—a thought

suggested by the comparison and given weight by Dr. Geneste's words.

"Yes?" asked Clare. "What did Dr. Geneste say?"

"Oh, perhaps I ought not to repeat it!" Helen faltered. "But it is nothing to mind about, really. He said that you were the most beautiful woman he had ever known."

"That is very kind and flattering. Did he say anything else about me?"

"No. How could he? At least, he told me that he had met you at Cedar Hill. We were looking on at the tennis when you drove up, and of course I was saying how much we all admired you; and then he said that it must be a trial for one so intellectual and so highly strung —I think those were his words—to lead this kind of life."

Clare blushed and turned the subject with a laugh. "If this kind of life means being taken care of at Brinda Plains, my dear, it it very much to my liking. And am I not keeping dinner waiting? You were quite right about the allamandas; they go much better with my dress."

It was evident that Helen Cusack had been carrying out in the drawing-room some Melbourne ideas of decoration. Clare remembered it as a comfortable, but inartistic room, with the furniture stiffly arranged, and few feminine prettinesses. Helen had pulled out the piano and draped it, had improvised screens, and pushed back the round table. She had laid emu-mats and pelican skins upon the polished cedar floor, and had put tall green things in pots at appropriate angles. The room looked full of people when Mrs. Tregaskiss entered. There was the party of Cusack girls, of whom Helen was the eldest; and their governess, Miss Lawford, pretty, and given to flirtation; and just now at the elbow of a quiet, consumptive-looking young man with a clever face, whose bright eyes eagerly followed Helen Cusack's every movement. Clare had heard that he was in love with Helen, and had followed her up from Melbourne. Then there was the delicate lady, still in her

white cloud, who had a sweet, bright face and laughed a great deal; and there were the girls without evening dresses, whom Helen had told Clare were the Misses Ocock, from one of the roughest of the small cattle-stations near the township of Ilgandah. One was short and dark and squarely made, with a determined, rather coarse face; the other was thin and weak, and had prominent light eyes and a great deal of teeth and gum. Mrs. Cusack was introducing an extremely awkward bushman to the determined-looking one, and trying to soften the young lady's discouraging reception of his uncouth bow, by the conciliatory remark:

"Oh, dear, no, Miss Ocock! You mustn't think that Mr. Wilmett wanted to run away when Mr. Cusack offered to introduce him to you at the races. I am sure Mr. Wilmett never ran away from a pretty girl. Anyhow, you must wait till after dinner, and give him a dance, and let him explain himself. We always dance after dinner, Mrs. Tregaskiss, when it isn't too hot, for the sake of the young people and to teach the boys—the unbroken colts, Mr. Cusack calls them. Here's one unbroken colt. Martin, come and shake hands with Mrs. Tregaskiss. And there's another! Harry, make your bow. Mrs. Tregaskiss is used to the best English manners, you know. Do you hear that, Mr. Blanchard? You ought to be delighted. Mr. Blanchard is our last new chum, and he hasn't got used yet to our rough ways. But we mustn't offend him by saying he is a new chum. He likes best being called Bishop—Bishop Blanchard. That's right, isn't it?"

There was a note of asperity in Mrs. Cusack's "chaff," which, for some reason not evident on the surface,—for very soon Clare discovered that he received with indifference more bludgeon-like sarcasms,—seemed to hurt the Englishman keenly. She presently told herself that it must be because his appearance gave point to the allusion, though he seemed singularly free from small vanities. He

reminded her of Doré's Neophyte, only that he was very much older,—too old, she thought, to be acting new chum,—and altogether of much more decided character and personality than the young monk. It was his eyes which had the same expression, and his face was of the thin, ascetic type which suggests martyrdom for the sake of a conviction. He was excessively handsome, and peculiarly refined—the refinement of far too subtle a nature to appeal to the Leura folk, who frankly owned they did not understand him, and accordingly revenged themselves by turning him into a butt for their jokes. Clare came to the conclusion that he was a man with a story. She learned later that he had only been a very short time at Brinda Plains.

She saw that he curbed his annoyance, covering it with the laughing remark: "Ah, Mrs. Cusack, won't you be merciful? You shouldn't always bring that unfortunate episode up against me."

"He only tried to reform the bullock-drivers, Mrs. Tregaskiss!" called out Mr. Cusack, in his great, self-satisfied voice. "Reproved them for swearing; said it wasn't English. Good boy, Blanchard! But you'll have to begin with the bosses first,—eh, Tregaskiss? I heard you let out a good round one at Tommy George a few minutes ago. You'll have the bishop down upon you if you don't take care."

At Tregaskiss' guffaw "the bishop" retreated into the background and began talking to one of the other new chums. There were always two or three young men at Brinda Plains learning colonial experience, and contrib uting, by the premium they paid, to Mr. Cusack's income. On the whole, they found an agreeable home, notwithstanding the tendency of the "unbroken colts" to practical joking, and the snubbings administered by the heads of the establishment on show of any airs of superiority. Mrs. Cusack was kind-hearted, if a little dictatorial, and,

moreover, she was the matchmaker of the district, and in pursuing this mission made her house a gay social centre.

The room was dim. Australian twilight quickly merges into darkness, and the shadow of a stand of calladiums obscured the near distance ; yet Clare had, as she entered, the flashing consciousness of a thin, muscular form, a falcon face, and an alert glance in her direction ; and now that Mr. Blanchard retired into the background, Geneste emerged from his station among a knot of men, of whom Tregaskiss was one, who were collected round the host.

"Dr. Geneste tells me he met you at Cedar Hill," went on Mrs. Cusack. She rarely for a moment stopped talking. "Seems so funny, doesn't it, to call a squatter neighbour 'doctor'? The only doctor I've known well on the Leura was a German one, who used to recite to us what he called 'The Rah-ven,' and who borrowed fifty pounds from Will, that he never paid back. He wasn't a doctor really—only a sort of school one. But Dr. Geneste is everything. One knows what being a physician in good practice in London means. And it's such a comfort in the district, and his being so kind about looking after people, too! I am sure our storekeeper would have died if it hadn't been for you." She turned to Dr. Geneste. "How have you found him this afternoon?"

"Oh, he's getting on splendidly, Mrs. Cusack ; and I shan't have an excuse any longer for riding over from Darra and getting a good dinner and delightful music."

Geneste shook hands with Mrs. Tregaskiss, and made a commonplace apology for having pushed on before the Tregaskiss buggy. "You see I got an early start, and was here two hours sooner than you. I'm glad you have taken my advice. Your husband tells me you mean to spell a day or two."

A white-capped maid, who was Ning's especial admiration, announced that dinner was on the table.

"Will, look after Mrs. Tregaskiss!" cried the hostess.

"She's our guest of honour. Oh, no, we won't go arm in arm; that's not bush fashion. Come along to my end, Mr. Tregaskiss, and help me with the carving. I advise you to stick to Helen, Dr. Geneste. She'll see that the boys don't victimise you."

It was a pleasant, noisy meal. The delicate lady on Mr. Cusack's other side chattered with a vivacity that was only checked now and then by a little dry cough, which she declared was a crumb gone the wrong way. Mrs. Cusack's tongue went all the time, keeping her end of the table lively. Miss Ocock had melted to her shy escort, and the thin girl found plenty to say to Mr. Blanchard in the shape of "chaff" about his English fastidiousness. "Was it true that he took his razors with him when he went camping out, and was he really so dreadfully clever and superior, and did he look down upon all Australians," etc.? The young man from Melbourne had deserted the governess and was on Helen's left hand, and Miss Lawford had consoled herself with the land commissioner, a sedate and stolid person, who had been lately left a widower, and was, report said, on the lookout for a second wife. Miss Lawford might be described as a crude Australian edition of Becky Sharp in the Jos Sedley epoch, and was open to the offer of any matrimonial establishment on the basis of an income exceeding two hundred a year, though she continually spoiled her chances by too daring flirtations. Mr. Cusack discoursed upon his new artesian bore and the perfect management.

"But when you've got to do with a big place like Tregaskiss', with your thirty thousand sheep to shear, it doesn't do not to have everything tip-top. Of course, on a little cattle-station it don't matter so much, as I tell Tregaskiss."

Mr. Cusack's patronage and brag had the effect of irritating Tregaskiss beyond measure and of intensifying Clare's rather haughty reserve.

"How anybody can care about that woman beats me," Mr. Cusack declared to the land commissioner later. "A black gin from the camp would be a deuced sight better company." To which the commissioner, who did not like Cusack, and meant to assess him as heavily as justice permitted, quoted the opinion of Cyrus Chance, the miser millionaire, that there was none in the district fit to hold a candle to Keith Tregaskiss' wife.

Dr. Geneste was on one side of Helen, and the young man from Melbourne got short and preoccupied replies to his eager remarks. Geneste and Helen seemed excellent friends, though it might have struck a close observer that at the beginning of the meal both were labouring under a slight embarrassment. But this wore off, on his side, at any rate. He talked to her about some books he had lent her, and led her on to the asking of questions and to the giving of her opinion upon them, which she did with a shy deference that must have been very taking. The attitude of preceptor to a charming girl is one which, from Abelard to the Nouvelle Heloise, has had its delights and its dangers. Geneste was twenty years older than Helen, and, moreover, was a man who had in his time stood out among men of abilities beyond the average. It was quite natural that Helen should regard him as a superior being.

The younger ones of the party went out after dinner and strolled about the garden, while the older gentlemen settled themselves in squatters' chairs in the veranda and smoked. Mrs. Cusack went with Clare Tregaskiss to see the baby. At dessert the company had been reinforced from the bachelors' quarters by one or two stray men, and the secretary of the Pastoralist Committee, who had ridden over from Ilgandah to convene a meeting for the discussion of precautionary measures against the threatened labour strike. Dessert, however, was mainly eaten out of doors.

The moon was just two nights older than when it had

illumined Dr. Geneste's ride and inspired his reflections between Cedar Hill and The Grave, and it gave sufficient light for the distinguishing of ripe strawberry guavas, passion fruit, and Cape mulberries just coming into season. Geneste and Helen presently found themselves separated from the rest—the result of innocent tendency on the part of the girl and of deliberate design on that of her governess. Miss Lawford had made a compact with herself to forego all attempt at flirtation with Geneste, and to further as far as lay in her power an understanding between the two. Helen, she guessed, was quite prepared to adore Geneste ; nothing could be more natural than that Geneste should admire Helen, and she herself would find her matrimonial operations much facilitated by a removal from the scene of this too attractive young lady of the house. Miss Lawford scented crisis in the meeting this evening ; and she was not wrong in her suspicion. On the occasion of Geneste's last visit to Brinda Plains there had passed between him and Helen that of which, ever since, the girl had never for one moment been unconscious.

CHAPTER VIII.

RETROSPECTIVE.

Yet the episode had been a nothing, counted in the life of any ordinary young woman.

The night had been just such an one as this, only that there was a fuller moon and the stars were paler diamonds in space. And they two had gone out after dinner and had made for the passion-vine trellis—where they were standing now—to see if any fruit were ripe yet. The fruit had not been nearly ready to gather ; the green eggs were only faintly purpling, but Geneste had been at pains to discover one which, in the moonlight at least, gave promise of sweetness.

"Try it," he said.

Helen bit into the rind with her pretty white teeth, slightly pointed in front like those of a rodent. It occurred to him at the moment to wonder whether, ascending to certain physiognomical theories, this peculiarity suggested a subtler side of her nature than appeared under the Madonna-like placidity of her expression. He remembered having read somewhere that the feature was supposed to be symptomatic of tenacity of purpose and of the affections. The trellis from which he had gathered the passion fruit overshadowed a bank against which a seat was placed, so that the turfed bank made a sort of cushion to the bench. The vine was planted in a bed at a higher level, from which the bank sloped, and tapestried the wall of a gardener's hut, spreading out as a roof to a roughly constructed veranda. The hut was now used as a fern house and was entered at the opposite side. Helen and

Geneste sat down on the bench—Mrs. Cusack called it her "lover's seat," and used to boast of the number of engagements which had been concluded on the spot. Helen toyed with the fruit, caressing it softly with her lips before she bit it. Geneste still watched her and thought how pretty she was and how tender. There was an unconscious coquetry in her action, which troubled and stirred him. The rind was acrid; she made a little wry face and threw the fruit away.

"It's not ripe yet. Poor thing! What a pity to gather it. Now it's dead and done for; it's bleeding away." She pointed to the pale purplish juice which exuded from the skin. "And I have killed it."

"Happy passion fruit! It has died in the flush of promise by a kiss from a woman's lips."

"A cruel kiss!"

"I am not sure—I think I envy the passion fruit. Imagine the rapturous expectancy as your breath ruffled its down, and the thrill when your mouth pressed against it—presuming, of course, that a passion fruit is capable of emotion, and, anyhow, its name justifies the fancy. And then the accessories: moonlight, the scent of tropical flowers, the silence and sweetness of the garden; and, above all, the death-dealer—a girl, a kiss! One couldn't conceive a more poetic euthanasia. How much better than to outlive hope, enjoyment, and romance, and then to die by degrees of old age and apathy."

"What a strange idea to come into your head. I didn't think men ever had notions of that kind."

"Don't you ever have notions of that kind?"

"Yes; oh, of course. I am quite silly about growing things. I always fancy that they have life."

"Of course they have life."

"I mean that they really feel."

"Naturally they do. They have nerves and digestions and sensations, and they love and hate and are sympa-

thetic with some human beings and antipathetic to others."

"How do you mean? Not really!"

"Yes. Haven't you noticed that when you and Miss Lawford gather roses and verbena and put them into your waistbands at the same time, hers are drooping and wretched an hour later, while yours are fresh and well-satisfied. Your atmosphere is sympathetic to them. Hers is not."

"I had never thought of that. But I *have* noticed that her flowers always droop when she has worn them a short time. How observant you are."

"I should have been a poor doctor if I had not trained myself to observe."

"Poor things! Yes, I think the flowers do like me," Helen said, with a little laugh. "I can't bear to throw them away, I always have the feeling that they suffer. Nothing can be more dreadful, as you say, than the slow withering up of sap and sweetness. I like to burn the poor dears, or else bury them. I should like——" She paused and looked whimsically at the passion-fruit in her hand. "I should like to bury this poor thing."

"By all means. The sentiment does you credit. Let us give the passion fruit honourable interment."

He spoke nervously, looking at her very fixedly as he did so. She blushed deeply under his gaze, and both tried to hide their embarrassment beneath an affectation of gaiety. Helen bent backward toward the flower bed, which sloped to a level with her shoulders, and lifting her arms in a particularly graceful attitude, scooped a hole in the earth, with a stick she picked up, and then she wrapped the fruit in one of its own green leaves and laid it in the hole, smoothing the mould as carefully as if she had been Ning burying her doll—Ning, by the way, had a graveyard of defunct pets. After that she gathered some tiny twigs and broke them into pieces, making with them a fence to

the miniature grave. All the time his gaze was on her face. Presently she turned to him and surprised his eyes, which had an expression in them she had never seen there before. It gave her a feeling of extreme happiness, and at the same time of extreme shyness. She drew back a little and held up her hands, palms upward, with a gesture that appealed to him in a degree upon which she had certainly not calculated, nor indeed he either.

"I've got prickles in my finger. There must be a prickly pear plant up there."

He took the two hands in his. "Which is it?"

"This one. Do you think me dreadfully stupid and babyish? Fancy digging a grave for a passion fruit! But it can't be trodden upon and squashed to pieces now, poor dear! and it deserves that much after the pretty things you said about it. But—do you think I am babyish?"

"I think you are——" His voice shook and the last word was spoken so low that she could not be certain what it was; she fancied that he said "adorable." Presently he said more loudly, but scarcely with more steadiness: "When I see you as you are to-night, you make me wish——"

"Wish? Tell me what."

"You make me wish that I were ten—fifteen years younger; different altogether from what I am; and that I could dare——"

Her hand fluttered in his like a little bird. He lifted it to his lips and kissed the finger which had prickles in it very tenderly and with self-restraint.

"Does it hurt now!"

"No. It didn't hurt. Dr. Geneste, I'm not a little child. Why do you wish that—that——"

"That I could dare—— Do you want to know what? I mean *this!*"

He put her hand down, and moved by a passionate

impulse which for the moment mastered him, caught her in his arms and pressed an eager kiss upon her lips. He repented and was ashamed of the impulse as soon as he had yielded to it. The cool touch of her childish mouth had the effect of sobering him. And then, as she leaned back with upturned head against his arms in the innocent abandonment of her trust and joy, the look upon her face almost frightened him. It told him the truth so plain. It made him realise, with a stinging sense of remorse, what he had done, and with a more selfish enlightenment, in what kind of position he had involved himself—a position from which he might find a difficulty in honourably retreating. It made him pull himself up shortly and sharply and ask of his reason : " Do I or do I not want to marry this girl ?"

There had always been in Geneste's character a curious blending of impulse and deliberation. Though feeling might hurry him to the very verge of crisis he was able to hold himself sufficiently in check to look across and calculate consequences before taking the leap. In a flash he saw, now, consequences that must follow upon that unpremeditated kiss, and determined to save himself and at least secure time for reflection. He was moved, too, by a chivalrous consideration, late though it came, for the girl herself. He was not self-indulgent at the cost of injury to others, and though he was in a manner weak, his moral code was a clearly defined one. He knew that he did not love Helen Cusack, though his fancy had been greatly attracted by her sweetness and prettiness, and had even dangled round the notion of her as his wife. He knew that she might get something far better than the lukewarm passion, alternating with calm affection, which was all that he could give her. It would hardly be fair, even supposing that he really desired her, to take advantage of a child's ignorant first love and chain her youth, her hopes, her latent capacities for the deepest emotion to a man old

enough to be her father. His resolution was taken. He unwound his arms very gently, took her two hands in his, drawing slightly away from her. Then he bent again and quite quietly imprinted a second and more chastened kiss upon her forehead. It was a token of apology and of regret. Then he released her altogether and got up, standing as a suppliant craving pardon.

"Oh, forgive me!" he exclaimed.

Helen had rightly interpreted his action. She shrank to the corner of the bench, and sat huddled up and with head downcast. For several moments she remained quite silent.

"Won't you forgive me?" he said again, in low pained tones. "I don't know how to excuse myself or to ask your pardon. I can't tell how I came to do it. It's years since I had—that sort of feeling toward a woman. I can't account for the sudden temptation to tell you—like that—that you are very dear to me. I suppose, as a matter of fact, it takes a man a long time to grow quite out of the feelings of youth and to keep from overstepping the line he had in sober judgment marked out for himself between friendship and anything warmer. I am myself now; I will never offend again."

Still Helen said nothing. Her silence distressed and perplexed him.

"Miss Cusack, I don't think that if you could see into my heart you'd be so angry with me; and you wouldn't look upon the thing perhaps quite in the same light as if it had been a young man who had taken such a liberty. I am twenty-five years older than you are. Oh, you must know that I couldn't honour you or feel more tenderly for you if you were my sister—or my daughter. You *do* know that. Won't you try and forget the folly of a moment and let me show you in future that I can deserve your friendship? Say you forgive me."

"The folly of a moment!" His words fell like the cut of a lash on Helen Cusack's heart. That was what he

called it. For her it had been a moment of bewildered ecstasy. She had met his lips in frank, full confidence. And now he wanted to show her that she mustn't make too much of what had been only a passing attraction toward a girl who had looked pretty in the moonlight and who had encouraged him by an exhibition of silly sentiment. She had been caught in a whirl—taken off her feet, as it were, and now though his tone had wounded her, and in a sense brought her back to common earth, she was hardly able to define her own feelings or to realise the exact position as regarded his toward her. There was at least the joy of having heard him say that she was very dear to him, mingled, though it was, with the dread that in reality he despised her. Helen was a proud girl and a brave one, too. At his last appeal she got up from the bench and, with a dignity that touched him deeply, held out her hand.

"Please don't say anything more. I think I understand. I am glad—that you—like me. Don't you think that we had better go back now? Father will be wanting me to play to him."

But it had been quite half an hour after their re-entrance before she had taken her place at the piano; and from that night there had come a look into her face and a note into her voice when she sang which had never been there before. She had not seen Geneste since then, until to-night; he had gone away early the next morning, and on the occasion when he had come over to tend the storekeeper, who was down with Northern fever, she had been away on a visit to the Ococks. But he had left her a packet of books, and a letter which was respectfully cordial, with, to her intelligence only, an underlying note of contrition. Mrs. Cusack read the letter and was faintly perplexed by its tone; she was also a little puzzled by a certain change which she noticed in her daughter, but oddly enough, matchmaker for the district as she was, it

never occurred to her that there might be any sort of flirtation going on between Geneste and Helen. In any case it was her way to let affairs of that kind take their course where her own family was concerned. Like a great many Australian mothers, she was indifferent in the matter of her daughter's matrimonial prospects; she felt certain that Helen would marry well some time, and was not disposed to hasten or retard the event.

It was this episode which both Helen and Geneste had vividly in their minds when to-night they found themselves alone under the passion-fruit trellis. This was the natural after-dinner resort. Helen had gone there in the company of Harold Gillespie, her Melbourne admirer, and had not been aware that Dr. Geneste was of the party till Miss Lawford, darting forward, had forcibly carried off Gillespie, and Helen, lingering for a few moments in sentimental reverie, had turned and come face to face with the man who filled her thoughts.

"Mrs. Cusack told me to bring up some passion fruit for Mrs. Tregaskiss," he said, with apparent unconcern; "but I am quite sure that she would like guavas better, and that she would rather gather them herself."

"Won't you go and bring her along, then?" said Helen, trying also to seem at ease.

"I can't. She and your mother have gone to put the baby to bed." He stood by the bench as if waiting for Helen to seat herself. "Let me find some ripe ones for you, Miss Cusack."

She sat down, and he reached up to where the purple fruit hung from the leafy roof, and plucked half a dozen, which he laid on the bench beside her. "They are quite ripe now," he said.

She did not answer. The fruit lay unnoticed. He took his place by her side, and as she leaned back sideways in something of the attitude which had so roused his admiration on the last time they had sat in this spot, his eyes,

by unconscious association, wandered past her to the tiny mound, still fenced in by the twigs she had placed round it. One or two of them had been blown down, and he stuck them upright again. Helen gave an involuntary shudder.

"Oh, don't!" she said.

"Why? Is the memory so hateful to you? Helen, haven't you really forgiven me? May we not be friends?"

"Yes; but it is not easy to forget, Dr. Geneste,—things that—hurt."

"Well, then, why forget them? Only instead of a pain let the recollection become a pleasure. May we not remember that—which passed between us as a pledge from me to you of sincere affection, of loyal friendship? Surely it would not be a pain to think of me as your friend? You can't help my being that, whether you like it or not. I shall never change in my feelings toward you."

"Ah!" Helen gave a quick drawing in of her breath, her manner altered completely, and became quite composed, almost hard. "How do you feel toward me? I wish to know. Tell me exactly, please, Dr. Geneste, how you think of me?"

He looked at her a little surprised by her question. The utter frankness of the Australian girl was as yet to him an uncalculated quantity. He did, however, in Helen's case, recognise the fact that frankness was the outcome of fearless innocence and also of self-respect. He began indeed to wonder whether he had rightly described her to Mrs. Tregaskiss as "not complex."

"I am afraid," he said hesitatingly, "that if I were to answer you truthfully you might think I was assuming what I have no right to assume. In fact, you might misunderstand my estimate of"—he hesitated—"of my influence over you—of our relations toward each other."

"No, I should not misunderstand you. I am giving you

credit for being—loyal—in your thoughts of me. You know quite well that I look up to you, and that I—like you." She made little qualifying pauses. "Of course I couldn't say such a thing to—Mr. Gillespie, for instance, or anybody else that I know. I shouldn't say it if you hadn't told me that I was—dear to you. I'm treating you like a friend, and I'm trusting you. If people are to be friends, there shouldn't be any false pride between them, to prevent their speaking out to each other in what concerns their friendship."

"That is noble of you, and I take you at your word. Thank you, Helen—I may call you Helen, just for to-night, mayn't I?"

"Tell me, then," she said again, "exactly how you think of me."

"I think of you as the purest and sweetest and truest girl I have ever known. I think of you so much and so tenderly that if I were of a different nature and the conditions other than they are——"

"The conditions?" she interrupted. "What are they?"

"I am an old man—even for my years, and those are three parts of an average lifetime. And I am a battered cripple into the bargain."

"Oh, that!" she said impatiently. "Your age! What does it matter?"

"It matters everything. You are eighteen. I am forty-five. Twenty-seven years between us. That means a chasm across which it is just possible for us now to clasp hands; but ten years hence the gulf would have widened beyond the faintest hope of real contact between us."

"Well?"

"What more can I say without seeming a conceited fool?"

"Never mind that. I should not look upon you so; and there is none else to mind about. I dare say you might

think me a forward, unmaidenly young woman if you judged me like anybody else, but it wouldn't be true. I feel in my heart it would not, and I don't care for anything that merely 'seems.'"

"Indeed, indeed," he exclaimed earnestly, "such a notion could never for an instant cross my mind. What could I feel but reverence, admiration, for you—for your generosity, your candour. What could I feel but the deepest sense of personal unworthiness? Oh, forgive me, Miss Cusack! Indeed, I don't know how to make it all clear to you."

"Never mind, let it be," she said again. "You have been telling me about 'conditions.' But you said, too, that if your nature were different. What did you mean by that?"

He hesitated again before answering. "Well, I will try to explain, but it is difficult. I am conscious that my nature is one which grasps at the fullest, the richest of its kind that life can give. In emotion, sensation, I want the most exquisite—or nothing. I could put aside the desire for love—love in its most real sense. I think I might deliberately choose for myself, as most fitting and satisfying, a calm interest and affection,—if I could consider that fair—to another." He spoke haltingly. "But if it were to be a question of love, that love must be the most complete, to ensure happiness; the most absorbing that there could be in the world. It must be perfect sympathy, perfect passion, community of mind and feeling, such as could exist only between a man and woman on the same platform as regards experience, or one should say, capacity of experience. That's impossible where there is a great difference in age. If you and I stood in such relation,—I speak boldly,—we should both be in a false position. I should be disappointed, however unreasonably; and far worse, I should disappoint the woman I wished to make happy. The end would be bitterness. In short if I were married to you, Helen,—I say

it out,—you would not be my wife in the real sense; nor would you be the dear girl-comrade whose thoughts and ways are so full of charm, and whose companionship is such a delight to me. Don't be offended at my frankness."

"I am not in the least offended. Is it not what I asked you for?" she replied gravely. "Only there is one thing I should like to say. You speak to me and of me as if I were a child out of the playroom. That's what you have labelled me in your fancy; and you dangle dolls before me and wrap up my powder in jam. I want to say that I am not a child; and that if you really seriously reflected about me, you would know from the fact of my talking to you as I am talking now, that I am a woman who can think as well as feel."

"You are giving me new revelations of your character, and I believe that you are right," he said. "That is one of the unexpected speeches you sometimes bring out, which make your mind a pleasure and, in part, a mystery to me; which make me afraid, and ashamed, too, of the feeling I have for you at moments—moments like that one for which I have begged your forgiveness."

"You mean that at such moments, you are—almost—in love with me.

"Yes," he said, in a low voice; "as you would understand it."

"But not in love with me enough to make you want to marry me? Tell me, is that so?"

"Since you will have the truth—as far as I know it, that is so. Helen, you put me into an ungracious position by forcing me to speak so plainly. What right have I to suppose that you would care to marry me? It is presumption on my part."

"I told you what I thought about that; and I don't think you have acted quite as if you thought it presumption," she said sadly, with a touch of irony that gave him a sense of humiliation. "What an odd talk we have had!"

Helen went on in a different tone. "It's something like the Lancelot and Elaine scene, I think. Do you know, Dr. Geneste, you have always seemed to me a sort of Lancelot."

He made an impatient gesture. "I am not in the faintest degree like Elaine's Lancelot," he said, with a laugh, "except in the being 'marred and more than twice her years'—any more than you are like Elaine, except in your youth and your fairness. And then there's one immense dissimilarity."

"You have no Guinevere—yet," she put in directly. "Was there ever a Guinevere? Will you show me that I am your friend, and tell me, frankly, if there was ever a Guinevere?"

"Yes." He spoke jerkily. "There was once a woman,—she was not a Guinevere, for she was free,—and she was bad; now she is dead, in as far as I am concerned with her."

Helen got up, and, as she did so, he also rose mechanically. She held out her hand and he clasped it. "Now I know that we are friends. Dr. Geneste, will you give me one more proof of your friendship. Will you make me a promise?"

"What is it?" he said uneasily.

"Will you promise me that if there should ever again—ever be a—Guinevere, you will tell me?"

He did not answer for a moment. She made as though she would withdraw her hand. He clasped it tighter and said: "Yes, I promise. But that will never be."

"If it is, you will tell me. And then—then—— No, we won't call her a Guinevere, for I couldn't wish you happiness, could I? I could only—only——"

"Only what?" he asked.

"I could only pray for you," she said very gravely, "and that I would do with my whole soul."

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE GARDEN.

The furniture was pushed back in the drawing-room, and they had begun dancing when Helen and Geneste reached the house. Mrs. Cusack was at the piano. She played with an energy and emphasis which seemed to say that her mission in life, during the evenings at any rate, was to provide a metronomical accompaniment to the capers of her young folk. Her music could hardly be called anything but a measure of time. She looked up and nodded as Geneste appeared.

"Putting the unbroken colts through their paces, you see! No use, I suppose, telling you to find a partner. But you can go and talk to Mrs. Tregaskiss on the veranda. She doesn't condescend to our bush amusements."

There was some acidity in Mrs. Cusack's tone. She was vexed because Mrs. Tregaskiss had declined to polka with her Martin. Martin was now consoling himself with the youngest Miss Ocock. He was an ungainly youth, all legs and arms, and with much of his father's self-importance. The Pastoralist committeeman and Miss Lawford were jigging from side to side, while the land commissioner looked on with melancholy interest from a doorway. He was not quite sure whether Miss Lawford attracted or repelled him. He had begun to think that, at any rate, as a wife, she would "keep him up to the mark." She was a young lady of catholic tendencies in the matter of flirtation, and now ran up to Tregaskiss, who was looking on too.

"You *must* take a turn with me, Mr. Tregaskiss. I

know that you dance beautifully, and, of course, you must have gone to heaps of balls when you were in England. Do, Mrs. Cusack, let us have a waltz."

"Oh, hang it! Miss Lawford, I'm too old and too fat, and a married man besides," laughed Tregaskiss, in his hoarse way. But he was flattered, and, with a little more persuasion, put his arm around the governess' waist and steered her off to Mrs. Cusack's somewhat soulless strains. Young Gillespie approached Helen.

"I've been waiting for you."

"I don't believe you *ought* to dance," she answered. "I heard you coughing this morning."

"Oh, don't, *please!* Why mayn't I be like other fellows?"

"You were sent up here for your health, you know."

"I wasn't sent. I came. And my health had nothing to do with it. I came because I wanted to see *you*," declared the young man boldly.

"Do you think your father would have got you two months' leave from the bank for that? Besides, all that is nonsense. I told you that you mustn't ever speak of it. Come, then, let us dance."

She cut short his second attempt at a tender speech. And she really liked waltzing with him. Gillespie and Helen were quite the best dancers in the room. They had the Melbourne step, which in Australia represents the Viennese. Compared with Helen's dancing, that of Miss Lawford seemed a vulgar romp. To-night she glided with an unusual stateliness, and her face was grave almost to sadness. Gillespie, quick to notice any change in Helen's demeanour and expression, told himself that she had somehow grown much older of late. There were depths in her eyes and a subdued tension in her manner that suggested some "experience." That was how he phrased it. In the case of a young girl, "experience" means only one thing. He spoke out his thought.

"I wish you'd tell me whether it's Geneste's coming that has made you different."

"Different! I don't understand."

"You used to be so jolly and bright and up to any fun, and you used to seem as if you liked talking to me. Now you're always reading those books Geneste lends you, and when you are not reading you are thinking, and when you are not thinking you are sitting out in the garden by yourself, or else with him."

"He has not been here for three weeks—three weeks to-day."

"How well you remember! Last time he was here you sat out with him in the garden nearly the whole evening; and now again you have done the same to-night. And when *I* ask you to take a turn to the lagoon, or to look at the stars, or to get mulberries or guavas, or anything else after dinner, you always say that you must play to your father."

"I thought you liked music."

"So I do; but I like talking to you all by myself better. You know what I told you, Nell?"

"You mustn't call me Nell. Nobody calls me Nell."

"My mother and sister and the girls in Melbourne did. Here you are 'Helen,' stiff, cold Helen—Dr. Geneste's Helen; only I dare say you are not stiff and cold to him."

"Stop! No, I don't mean stop dancing, but saying things like that. If you go on, I shall never speak to you again. It's impertinent and—uncalled for to couple my name with other people's names."

"Geneste isn't 'other people.' Nell, tell me, tell me truthfully, does he want to marry you?"

"Yes, I will tell you truthfully—that he does *not* want to marry me."

"How strangely your voice sounds! One might think——"

"What? Take care!"

"Oh, dash it! Of course it would be impertinent to hint that you—— And, of course, he is a great deal too old for you, Nell."

"That is certainly true. He is twenty-five years older than I am, and we are great friends and nothing else, and never shall be anything else as long as we live. Is that enough for you? Now, please don't ever speak of him in that way again."

"No, I won't. You've relieved my mind. You know what I hope. Naturally, I have to wait till I've got my step in the bank. But that's sure to come soon—with the governor's interest."

"Oh, yes, of course it is a grand thing to have a father who is in the Ministry. But you are breaking the contract. And now, I'm going to make mother let me play for a bit, and you can get Miss Ocock to dance with you."

"No; I will have Minnie. She's next best to you. Or shall I ask Mrs. Tregaskiss—she's out in the veranda?"

But Mrs. Tregaskiss was not in the veranda. She had strolled unnoticed along the gravel walk to the side of the house where some young orange trees were in bloom, making the night fragrant. A short path between the orange trees led to the children's wing, where Ning was sleeping, and which adjoined the room in the main building given to Clare and her husband. She had a vague intention of listening whether her baby was awake, but all was silent, and Claribel, the half-caste, squatted outside the French window unctuously chewing a bit of sorghum and keeping guard over her infant charge. The barrel-organ sound of the piano sounded less aggressively here, and only scraps of the bushmen's talk in the veranda, which had got upon her nerves as she sat and listened to it, floated into the night.

"Horse knocked out—he was in low condition, and the long stage cooked him. Those beats are rolling fat. If you cross Moolburra Range—track to the right—brings you

alongside of an old sheep-station. Follow the range—can't miss it," and so on.

This was the sort of intellectual food which social evenings on the Leura usually furnished. At home, Clare would sit and sew, and listen with a certain dull interest, because the talk had mostly to do with the business of their own station, and Tregaskiss had a way of appealing to her occasionally in such remarks as:

"I say, Clare, did you hear that? The Gripper has been going for our clean-skins," or, "Clare, remember, will you, that the men at the bore want rations, and weigh them out for Tommy George to take to-morrow?" and it would happen that she got "chaffed" or scolded, according to Tregaskiss' humour, if she awakened out of a dream and confessed that she had not heard what had been said to her. But there was no obligation to keep a mind alert to cattle talk in Mr. Cusack's house. And oh, what an evening on which to escape from everyday worries in dreams, if, indeed, dreaming could bring her either satisfaction or hope. Presently another sentence of the bushmen's conversation roused her and struck some chord of whimsical association, though in itself it was quite unimportant, so that she laughed softly to herself.

"Do you like the garden here, Mrs. Tregaskiss?" Dr. Geneste said, coming quietly beside her. "It seems my fate to startle you," he added, as she turned with a quick movement at the sound of his voice. "The music and the insects, and those fellows holding forth about their stations and their stock, drowned my footsteps, I expect. Mrs. Cusack told me to come and look after you—she said you didn't care to dance."

"Oh, my dancing days are over long ago!" Clare answered.

"Why do you talk as if everything had ended for you, and you were an old woman?"

"So I am—old—old—old. Look at the plain," she went

on irrelevantly. "In this light it is exactly like the sea. Do you know what I was thinking, and what this garden put me in mind of? You remember the terrace at Monte Carlo?"

"Yes; but I can't imagine anything more unlike this scene."

"Oh, no, not at all. There, that long stretch of plain is the Mediterranean—when it is a bluey-brown colour on a muggy night. That fence of prickly pear with the aloe sticking up, and the pepper tree, might be the sea-parapet; and the hum of the insects is very much the same, or you might fancy it the murmur of the waves. And the orange flowers and the bamboos, and those trellises of thumbergia and allamanda, and the shrubs of scented verbena—oh, don't you love scented verbena?" She gathered a sprig as she spoke, and crumbled it between her fingers, inhaling its perfume with a luxurious enjoyment that, as he watched her, gave him a curious feeling as to a certain finely sensuous side to her nature. "Then, the lights behind," she went on, "and the sound of the music, of voices, and of laughter, and all the rest. All that ought to be there, even if one cannot find it. No, I don't think the comparison is so tremendously out. Anyhow, it came into my mind."

"When were you at Monte Carlo?"

"Years and years ago—before I was married. My poor father took me one Easter to the Riviera, and we spent a fortnight at Monte Carlo."

She gathered a bit of orange blossom, smelled it, and tossed it away. "I suppose those were the days when I had the illusions, or at least such of those as I was capable of cherishing—which you said belonged to youth, love, and all that. No," she added, correcting herself, "I don't think that even then I was capable of imagining the sort of Areadia into which young girls are supposed to enter when they are first engaged. It's rather wonderful, considering the conditions."

"The conditions!" he repeated. "Yes, perhaps it was wonderful. You were engaged to be married and your—your future husband was with you. One must conclude that the conditions were favourable to romance."

She was silent for a moment. Then she said: "You are saying to yourself that Mr. Tregaskiss could never have been a very romantic kind of person, not the kind whom one naturally associates with Monte Carlo, and music, and human drama. But I was not engaged to Mr. Tregaskiss. It was someone else."

"Ah!" He wondered if he had got the clue to her tragic resignation. There had been someone else. Then he remembered her allusion to a lover who had deserted her in the day of adversity.

"Surely if you were in such love with the man you were engaged to, you must have found yourself in Arcadia, if only for a short time," he said.

"I was never much in love with him," she answered calmly; "and when he left me my pride only was wounded. He was handsome and fashionable, and better born than I, and he only wanted me because he thought I had money. It was after he threw me over that I married Keith Tregaskiss. Now, do you understand?"

"Yes," he said quietly, "I understand. I am very sorry for you, and I wish that I could help you."

"Never mind. Can you guess what I was thinking of when you interrupted me just now?" she asked abruptly.

"No, for I am sure that if I drew the commonplace inference I should be wrong. And you seemed amused at something."

She laughed again. "It's commonplace enough. Somebody over there was saying something about a 'poley cow' that had got into the pound at Ilgandah, and had to be bought out. It struck me as a great pity that all this poetic setting should be wasted on such very prosaic drama as the ransoming of a poley cow."

He laughed too, but uneasily.

"You may be quite certain," he said, "that there's more human drama going on among those dancers in there, than any of us suspect. Just think of poor little Miss Lawford, and the tragedy of disappointed affections and blighted hopes which may underlie that boisterous gaiety. Think of the land commissioner, whose heart is buried in his wife's grave——"

"No, no," she interrupted. "Miss Lawford has resurrected it."

"Well, there's something sensational in that idea, anyhow. And talking of tragedy, here's one. Did you notice the thin, fair woman with the very bright colour, whom I wouldn't allow to come out into the garden after dinner, for I knew she would be romping with the girls and exerting herself?"

"Mrs. Carmody? Yes, I know all about her. The bank came down on Ballandean and her husband is just allowed to carry it on on the chance of working off the debt, and so they can't have a servant or proper hands for the run, and she helps him to muster, and milks the cows, and mends and makes and toils, and teaches the children into the bargain. And there are a lot of children; but it's a common tragedy out here, after all, though I was thinking during dinner, Dr. Geneste, that Mrs. Carmody is an example to me. Mrs. Cusack has got her here for a little holiday, and see how she is enjoying it, and how gay and plucky and bright she is."

"I don't think you want to have an example, you are one yourself to all of us. That's not the tragedy, for her nature wouldn't make it one. She isn't complex, and she doesn't soar to higher things; her children and her daily round content her. The tragedy is that the children want her, and Carmody wants her, and her grip on life in one sense is keen, and one could as soon convince her that she is blind as that she has, as I greatly fear, a disease which

may kill her. As for Carmody, he is just an obstinate dunderhead. He won't let himself believe there is anything the matter with her—as long as she says she is all right. He laughs at me and won't even let me doctor her."

"Is she really so ill? She doesn't look so." Clare was startled. "It's consumption, I suppose?"

"No, it's something else—unless I am very much deceived; and, as I tell you, her husband laughs at the notion of anything serious being the matter. If you ever get a chance, Mrs. Tregaskiss, you might do something there. He won't let me overhaul her."

"Yes, if it is possible, I will," she answered gravely.

They walked on, talking of poor Mrs. Carmody, and turned, coming presently to a point from which they could see the dancers in the drawing-room. Mrs. Carmody, silhouetted against the light wall, seemed to be chattering eagerly. Miss Lawford was now at the piano, and Mrs. Cusack was fussing about in the dining-room, where refreshments of fruit, cake, and home-made lemonade were being set out. Tregaskiss was with her, and at the moment was pouring some spirit from the decanter and mixing it with the lemonade. Helen Cusack passed by with young Gillespie. Clare looked at her companion and saw that his eyes were following the girl. She said impulsively: "Yes, I was quite wrong. Everything in the bush isn't prosaic. There's a bit of romance here that will turn perhaps into a pretty love story."

"A love story!" he repeated sharply.

"Mr. Gillespie is in love with Miss Cusack. Did you not know that?"

"It—— No, I confess that had not occurred to me."

"I can see all the elements of a hopeless passion," she went on, in her soft, deliberate voice, and smiling that repressed smile of hers, which might mean so much or so little. He had an impatient fancy that she was probing him, searching him with her long narrowed gaze, that she

might discover his real feeling for Helen Cusack. He was not altogether wrong. "To me," Clare added, "Mr. Gillespie looks consumptive. I should have thought him in far worse case than Mrs. Carmody."

"Oh, he will got over that—just the after-effects of influenza. I suppose it would be a good match for her," he said with an effort.

"Oh, yes, of course. Mrs. Cusack tells me that his father is Minister or Speaker—or something of the sort. But you know, Dr. Geneste, that Helen doesn't care for him—not the least little bit."

He said nothing. She persisted.

"You do know that, don't you?"

"Why should I know it?"

"Because—— Never mind."

CHAPTER X.

LIGHT ON THE TRAGEDY.

CLARE stopped suddenly and resumed her walk. They passed again the French window that opened into the dining-room, and Tregaskiss' tones, jovial, yet with their rasping inflexion, struck disagreeably on Geneste's ear.

"I say, Mrs. Cusack, what are we to call this splendid tipple—lemonade cocktail—Brinda squash—Leura eye-opener—eh, what do you think of that? I wish you'd give my wife the receipt. The best woman in the world, Mrs. Tregaskiss, and, by Jove! as good a housekeeper as you'd find on the Leura; but there's one thing she isn't quite first-rate at, and that's making drinks. A fellow wants something cool and refreshing and stimulating too, when he comes in hot and tired from a day's mustering."

"Well, you haven't been mustering on the run to-day, Mr. Tregaskiss, though I dare say driving a buggy over the plains is hot work, too, in its way." It was Mrs. Cusack's cheery voice that answered, with just a faint note of disapproval in it, tempered by the natural geniality of the hostess. "Anyhow, I shan't allow you that excuse for indulging too freely in my Leura eye-opener," and there was the laugh which covers half intention in a joking speech. "Of course I'll be delighted to give Mrs. Tregaskiss the receipt, and you'll remember it's the infusion of herbs,—and I'll give you some of ours in case you don't grow them at Wombo,—as well as a wee bit stronger dash of Will's old rum than ordinary, that gives it the flavour. Now, Mr. Tregaskiss, I'm just going to insist on your dancing this with Minnie. After seeing you with

Miss Lawford, I can't be made believe you don't know how." Tregaskiss protested he was old—too fat. Miss Lawford was so full of "go" that she'd put spirit into any "crawler"; that was a woman after his own heart; he didn't mean anything disrespectful to Minnie, and as she wasn't out of the schoolroom, he needn't mind his p's and q's, but the fact was she couldn't hold a candle to her governess.

Geneste watched Mrs. Tregaskiss' face while the colloquy went on. Illumined by the light from the house, it wore, he thought, the strangest expression—a blending of pity, contempt, keen anxiety, and angry determination. She had come to a dead halt, and he too had waited. Now she made an impatient gesture and stepped quickly across a bit of lawn intervening between where they stood and the veranda. It seemed to him odd that, looking deliberately in front and about her as she did, she should stumble awkwardly over a croquet hoop which was quite visible—a white arch on the green. She half fell, stretching out her hands, and giving a cry: "Keith, oh, Keith!"

Dr. Geneste sprang forward:

"Have you hurt yourself, Mrs. Tregaskiss?"

He would have lifted her, but she waved him back, raising herself from the ground and again calling out:

"Keith, come here!"

Her call had stopped the dancing and brought forth Mrs. Cusack and some others from the house. Tregaskiss followed his hostess with a lurching gait. There were eager questions. Had she sprained her foot?—it was those tiresome croquet hoops, which no one would remember to take up! Mrs. Tregaskiss put her arm within her husband's. She was completely self-controlled again, and spoke with rapid decision.

"I am so sorry to have made such a disturbance. Yes, I think I have turned my ankle a little. Oh, it's nothing, really! Please go on dancing and don't mind me. No, I

am not in pain, thank you. Mr. Tregaskiss will go with me to my room, and we'll be back presently. Come, Keith."

She drew her husband with her toward the wing which was approached through the little orange grove. He had put his arm round her and showed a sort of dull concern, repeating: "What's the matter, Clare? what's the matter? You aren't hurt, are you? I say, you don't mean that you're hurt?"

"She seems to be walking all right," remarked Mrs. Cusack. "I don't think it's anything serious. I know one feels horrid after twisting one's foot, but it goes off in a moment or two. Do come in, Dr. Geneste. I want you to look after Mrs. Carmody, and make her have some supper and pack her off to bed, poor thing!"

It was half an hour before Mrs. Tregaskiss and her husband returned. She looked very pale and her eyes shone with that repressed fire which Dr. Geneste had begun to know; but she walked easily, declared that her foot did not hurt her at all now, and gave no sign of discomposure. "Baby had wakened, and they had been putting it to sleep," she said. Tregaskiss attended to her with a half sulky solicitude. He pressed her to try the "Leura eye-opener," but she refused, with a gesture of dislike. She "was not fond of the taste or smell of rum." But she listened with interest to Mr. Cusack's commendation of his wife's concoction, begged for directions how to make it, discussed the Chinese gardener in relation to the providing of those necessary herbs, and was altogether gracious and almost talkative, always with the fixed, far-away smile which Dr. Geneste had got to look for too, and which he associated somehow with the Sphinx notion and that of pent tragedy. The folding doors between the dining- and drawing-rooms were open, and in the latter some desultory music was going on. There was romping, too, among the younger set—the boys, Minnie, Miss Lawford, and the gentlemen from the bachelors' quarters. If Mrs. Tregaskiss

suggested the Sphinx, the governess had certainly a touch of the Mænad. She was excited, voluble, and eager to attract notice. Her big black eyes rolled hither and thither, and her white teeth flashed in continual laughter from between red lips. Dr. Geneste mentally classed her as of the hysterical temperament. Perhaps, he thought, she was trying to pique the land commissioner into a proposal, by a flirtation with Tregaskiss, upon which the presence of his wife made it impossible to place an evil construction. Clare's husband had sauntered into the group, and was paying attention to the governess with demonstrative candour. One of the young men played a Highland schottische, which Tregaskiss and Miss Lawford danced with fervid interlacing of arms, and looks which freely incited and freely gave back admiration. The dance seemed unduly prolonged. Clare watched it stonily. Mrs. Cusack fidgetted with annoyance.

"Really," she murmured crossly, "Miss Lawford allows her spirits to run away with her. I don't think I *can* allow this kind of thing to go on. It's such a pity that she should be so flighty. She teaches admirably, and when there are no gentlemen about is quite sensible and well-behaved, and a cheerful companion to the children. I suppose that, as it's your husband, my dear, she thinks herself safe; but still there *are* limits. And then, there's my Martin, I begin to see, quite ready to make a fool of himself and to be jealous of Mr. Walford or anybody else she encourages."

Mr. Walford was the land commissioner. He was standing in the doorway, a pained expression upon his stolid face. Martin was glowering in a corner of the drawing-room. Clare laughed softly. "Oh, why shouldn't they enjoy themselves?" she said.

"No, my dear; you wouldn't approve if you had girls growing up ready to follow a bad example. I hope Mr. Tregaskiss won't be offended if I give him a hint."

Mrs. Cusack marched determinedly forward.

"There's too much romping in here for my taste," she said. "Miss Lawford, I think we have had enough of that noisy dance. Mr. Tregaskiss, you look quite out of breath, and you'll be scandalising the bishop, you know. No, don't be cross, Mr. Blanchard, I'm not going to chaff any more; *you* are behaving very nicely and I'm glad to see that you are entertaining Miss Selina Ocock. Minnie, it's your bedtime. And there's Mrs. Carmody coughing again. That's right, Dr. Geneste, make her go off too. Miss Lawford, you'll see Mrs. Carmody to her room and take care, please, that she has everything she wants. Where's Helen? Oh, Mr. Gillespie, do go and find Helen, and get her to come and play an accompaniment for Mr. Blanchard. We should so enjoy one of Mr. Blanchard's nice English songs."

Mrs. Cusack fussed round setting everything to rights. Mr. Blanchard came unwillingly out of the corner where he had been confiding his woes to the limp Miss Ocock. Helen had been talking to the secretary of the Pastoralist Committee, and now came in from the veranda and sat down to the piano. Mrs. Cusack, in her managing fashion, settled the rest of the party in squatters' chairs and ordered the gentlemen to smoke. Tregaskiss sulkily approached his wife and grumbled about "confounded interference just when people were beginning to enjoy themselves." Tosti's "Good-bye" floated out into the fragrant night. Mr. Blanchard had a good voice, and it had been fairly trained, probably among musical sisters at home. Clare used to hear that song in old days, sung by a handsome professional tenor who had been in love with Gladys Warraker. But Gladys had not cared for the tenor "unutterably," as she had phrased her idea of the sacramental passion, and had preferred to make a prudent alliance with rich, elderly Mr. Hilditch. The memory of Gladys set Clare thinking of by-gone days—of that phase of her girl-life in which she had dreamed dreams, and

which seemed now, in contrast with the crude realities of Australian life, almost like a vaguely remembered fairy story that had symbolised a spiritual truth. There was only one person here whom she felt to be in harmony with that sleeping inner self that had discerned truth in fairy tale. It was Geneste.

She waked out of her reverie as the song ended. Tregaskiss had gone, Dr. Geneste was beside her. She had a fancy that he read her thoughts. "I am going to slip away to my room," she said. "I am very tired. Will you explain to Mrs. Cusack, and perhaps——" She looked round. "I don't see my husband. Perhaps you would kindly tell him too, and ask him to come to me as soon as he can."

"Certainly. I hope your foot does not hurt you?"

"No, thank you."

"You did not sprain it, then?"

"No." Then she added suddenly: "There was nothing at all wrong with it. Good-night!"

She held out her hand. He took it. "Good-night, Mrs. Tregaskiss!"

She passed her husband as she moved along the veranda. He was stumbling across the ledge of the dining-room window, moving in rather furtive fashion.

"Keith!" She followed him into the room. He turned angrily upon her. Geneste was near enough to hear what passed.

"I'm going to bed, Keith. Will you soon come along?"

"No! Why should I? Going to have 'nother dance with —little governess. Confoundedly thirsty. I say, where's that stuff?"

He spoke thickly. Geneste admired Mrs. Tregaskiss' tact and self-control.

"I think they've cleared it away. Come, never mind it. If you are thirsty, there's some brandy in the flask in my room, and Claribel will run for cool water from the bag in the veranda."

"You're telling me lies." Tregaskiss spoke with half tipsy solemnity. "I know what it is, you want to get me off; you're jealous. I've got to have that out with you. Jealous of the little governess! I shan't allow any d——d prying and meddling, do you understand?"

Clare said nothing; she did not even look at him; it seemed to Geneste that her strange smile scarcely faded; it was always there, as if carved in marble. Her whole form braced itself as if stiffened with iron; she turned her back on him and walked quickly to her own room.

"Good God!" murmured Geneste to himself. "So that's the trouble!"

He kept close to Tregaskiss for the rest of the evening; played boon companion to him; guarded him from Mrs. Cusack's sallies; interposed suavely, when a bragging speech of Mr. Cusack's threatened to provoke a quarrel; deferred to Tregaskiss' opinions, silencing him by acquiescence; sat beside him later, when the ladies had gone and the pipes were refilled, and the brandy passed round; and at last conveyed him, cleverly covering the retreat by way of the orange grove, to the door of Mrs. Tregaskiss' chamber.

Tregaskiss fumbled with the handle, unable to turn it. Then he swore huskily and called to his wife to open. When she did so he reeled against the wall and hiccoughed an apology. She stood a straight, tragic figure in her white dressing-gown. Not one word passed her lips. She put out her hand, the thin arm, full of nervous force, showing from out her loose sleeve, and drew her husband into the room. When she came back to close the window, she saw Geneste.

"I thought it best to see him safe," he said. "Can I do anything?"

"No; nothing, thank you."

"You are all right?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes. You are very kind. Please tell me—I hope there was nothing—nothing unpleasant?"

"No; it was not noticeable. We have been together since you left. I saw how it was—the heat, no doubt, and the long drive in the sun."

"Yes. Last year he had a touch of sunstroke; it has been worse since then."

"Ah, that accounts. Don't fret about it, Mrs. Tregaskiss. Let us talk it over to-morrow. I may be able to do something."

"No, not to-morrow. I am not fit—here—to tell you things. Perhaps when you come to Mount Wombo."

There was stertorous muttering within, a groping, and the sound of a dull, soft fall. Tregaskiss, fuddled with drink, had flung himself, dressed as he was, heavily across the bed. The baby was in a cot on the side where his head lay. The inert creature was already in a state of drunken torpor.

"Can't I get him into his dressing-room?" Geneste said. The coarse, squalid reality of the situation struck him with the grimmest sense of pathos.

"There's no bed there. It doesn't matter."

"But you—where are you going to sleep?"

"It doesn't matter. I shall lie on the sofa. Please go. I am afraid of baby waking."

He was reluctant. "Please go," she repeated. There was nothing to be done. As he moved away, she said in a very low voice, but clear in its fervour. "Thank you! I *know* I can trust you."

He himself was lodged in the bachelors' quarters. He came out again under pretence of smoking a pipe, and spent half the night in the orange grove. A light burned nearly all the time in Mrs. Tregaskiss' room. At last it was put out, and he went away. But he lay awake till morning, picturing her sitting there in her white dressing-gown watching the sodden sleep of her husband, or else stilling his babe and hers at her breast. It was horrible.

CHAPTER XI.

MOUNT WOMBO.

Mrs. Tregaskiss was at home. The home was typically Australian. Imagine a clearing in gidia scrub—this, the border of a greater scrub, stretching along at the back and sloping upward to the low-lying range from which Mount Wombo takes its name, for a very little hill becomes a mountain in these flat lands. The scrub spread down to a plain, shaping itself into ragged slips like an uneven fringe. There was a lagoon at the foot of the hill, round it a few bigger trees ; and some blacks were disporting themselves in the water. Not very far from the lagoon stood a rough stockyard, with the inevitable flock of carrion crows, and the sickly growth of "fat-hen" by the milking bails. Further still, set in the clearing, which has four avenues debouching from it through the gidia scrub, there was a low, zinc-roofed house of sawn planks, the zinc sheets raised a little above an under roof of bark,—as is the way in this parched land,—so the air may pass between and temper the scorching heat given out on summer days from the glaring iron. Building-wood is scarce in the Leura region, for the melancholy gidia scrubs do not provide suitable material ; and labour and carriage are dear ; thus shingles, and very often flooring-boards, are unknown luxuries. They were so in the greater part of the Tregaskiss' house, the floor in most of the rooms being of a kind of earthen cement made from pounded ant-beds—those miniature clay mountains along the tracks, which are a feature of the district. The low house had verandas, with rough posts and bough-shades, covered by passion vine and

native cucumber. To the right was a big room perched upon piles, with a veranda all round. Under it is the dairy, a battened-in corner, the rest of the space lying open and used as a shelter for the station buggy, and also as a workshop, with a carpenter's table and saddling tools, and with saddles and harness lying about in process of re-lining. The upper room had a wooden floor,—it was Claire's bedroom,—and the veranda, in which were canvas chairs, children's toys, and the sewing-machine in a sheltered angle, was used generally as the family sitting-room. Round the house was a rough sapling fence enclosing a patch of flower-garden, dependent mostly on Clare's ministrations—the Chinaman's garden, where vegetables and watermelons and maize and the luzerne crop were grown, being down by the lagoon, and Li Hong not concerning himself about such frivolous things as flowers. But there were flowers in the garden, nevertheless—petunia and flox and verbena and flaring gladiolas and the flame-coloured bignonia; and there were, besides, a loquat tree and a Brazilian cherry, and two or three young orange trees.

At the back stood bark-roofed outhouses—the meat store with bullock hides stretched out on the roof to dry, the store, and the kitchen, which had its bough-shade too —these outbuildings not trim and taut like the back premises at Brinda Plains, but slanting, untidy, unfenced, rank brown grass growing where it would, the few stunted gidias and sandal-wood left by the clearers showing scant, dried-up foliage, the unlovely corrugated roofs sending out a blinding glare. The kangaroo dogs yapped discontentedly; a couple of black gins, their pickaninnies playing close by, were peeling potatoes in the open and scattering the shavings to a brood of lean fowls. No, there was nothing poetic, nothing picturesque, about Mrs. Tregaskiss' home.

A fit of repentance and of reactionary good humour had

followed Tregaskiss' excess at Brinda Plains. Clare had met the situation stoically, and while their visit lasted, ignored the possibility of its having been grasped by the Cusacks. But her humiliation was intense. She showed herself to be not a great woman in her susceptibility to the stabs of wounded pride. To be pitied by the common herd was gall to her; the baring of her secret wounds, agony. She avoided Dr. Geneste,—he left the next afternoon,—but something in her eyes and voice, when she "hoped that they should see him soon at Mount Wombo," told him that her confidence was but delayed. She did not resent his knowledge of her trouble, but she bitterly and unreasonably resented what she saw to be Helen's instinctive understanding of it and sympathy with herself. Helen hung on all day to Mrs. Tregaskiss, and longed to tell her of her admiration and how sorry she was for her, and that she despised Keith Tregaskiss, and hated Miss Lawford for having drawn him on to make a fool of himself. Helen was so sad herself just now, that it seemed appropriate for her to sympathise with another sad woman. Reflections on Mrs. Tregaskiss' position led her into serious thoughts on marriage in general. She had had one passionate impulse of pique prompting her to engage herself to Harold Gillespie, and thus prove to Dr. Geneste that there was at least another man who valued her. But the impulse did not last. She acknowledged that her Lancelot was not impeccable; he had had no right to play with her, to take her in his arms and let her, for an instant, believe that he loved her. But, at all events, he had been true and frank to her that evening; and his friendship and respect were something still to live for. Better love on even "in vain," her nature ennobled by a real emotion, than debase herself to the level of a—Miss Lawford! For the moment she spent her contempt and indignation upon the governess and upon Clare's husband. In justice, it must be said that Tregaskiss rarely

exceeded in such a manner as to make himself conspicuous. He was the kind of drinker who "nips" all day, but who would angrily disclaim the imputation of being a drunkard. Of course he was not a drunkard! He had had a touch of the sun, and couldn't stand up to liquor as he used—this was how he would put it to himself. And that same touch of the sun made him feel the need of constant stimulant. He ran down; he couldn't manage the long hot days without some sort of sustainment; his brain needed excitement to keep it moving. Life was deadly monotonous on the Leura. The bank held him too tight to allow of his gambling much in mining shares and so forth. Drought and dying cattle might well drive a fellow to drown his cares. He knew that a glass beyond the justifiable quantity made him irritable, and Clare wasn't half the companion she had once been. Even her ridiculous fancies had been amusing when she had opened out to him, but she never did that now. She had grown dull. Who could ever dream that this silent, stand-off woman had been the brilliant Miss Gardyne of Queen's Gate days? They had been ten years married, and a man, he told himself, got to feel by that time the want of a little variety. It was a mistake to tie one's self up too soon, and ruin all one's best years. Well, anyhow, they had jogged along so far, and he supposed they would jog on to the end of the chapter. He'd have a spree down in Sydney or Melbourne as soon as things looked up, and come back to her fresh and good-tempered. The rough had to be taken with the smooth, in marriage as well as in Australian squatting; and the rough wasn't all on Clare's side. After all, he had acted heroically in marrying her under the conditions! Poor Clare! She had so generously insisted on this fact in the early times that he accepted it as no longer a matter of controversy. This was how Tregaskiss argued to himself.

He was down in the workshed now, tinkering at saddles,

Ning with him. Every now and then Clare, in the veranda above, caught scraps of their talk.

"Daddy, where's my hammer?"

"Don't know, Ningums."

"Daddy, a big kangaloo came and the dogs bited it, and Tommy George held it by the tail, and mine yan budgery quick—I wunned," corrected Ning,—"mummy says I mustn't talk blacks' language,—and I cried, for the kangaloo was all bloody. And mummy came and beat the dogs with a whip. I don't like kangaloos. Daddy, what would you do if the nasty union men came here? Would you shoot them, and would they be good to eat?"

Tregaskiss' big laugh grated, as it always did, upon his wife. It seemed to her that it was only of late years he had got to laugh like that—since his sunstroke, as she put it. There was something a little vacant in the laugh, although it was consequential, too, and had in it a note of irritation. That note of irritation was at all times more or less dominant in Tregaskiss' whole personality.

The click of Clare's sewing-machine, as she went on with her work, drowned Ning's prattle. Presently the queer little figure, in its one garment of summer,—a combination overall and knickerbockers of Turkey-red,—and with a flapping white sunbonnet on its head, came out of the workshop and joined Claribel, who was walking with the baby up and down the lower veranda, within the mother's sight. At intervals Clare would conscientiously turn her head to see that all was well with the children, and then proceed with her seam, or else she would lean back wearily and rest for a minute or two before bending once more over the treadle. She was looking very thin and out of health, but she had been taking Geneste's drops, and had not had another fainting fit since the one at Cedar Hill.

By and by Tregaskiss came up by a little outside stair connecting the upper and lower verandas. He was in

summer working garb—a light woollen shirt open at the neck, the sleeves rolled above his elbows, moleskin breeches, and a pith hat with a puggaree. Beads of perspiration hung from his fair moustache, and stood out upon his red, brawny chest, as it showed between the folds of his shirt where the collar was unfastened. The leather strap around his waist held his tobacco pouch, his pistol holster, watch pouch, and large knife. He was smoking a short brairwood pipe, much blackened.

"I want lunch earlier," he said. "I have got to go with rations to the bore this afternoon. See about it, will you?"

She got up and went down the stairs, along the other veranda, and by a short gangway to the kitchen—one of the rough out-humpeys, with a zinc roof and a bough-shade. Tregaskiss followed her to the head of the stairs, and leaned over the balcony railing looking out on the back yard.

Ah Sin, the cook, was coming from the meat store with a dripping piece of salt beef, which he had just taken from the cask. He showed a fat, smiling, yellow face. Ah Sin was, to Mrs. Tregaskiss, one of the minor alleviations of Western life. He was never out of temper.

"Velly well, missee. My makee quick fire. But my word, missee, Englishee woman no good. That velly lazy. No makee beds this morning, no washee clothes; altogether 'Gusta no good."

If Ah Sin was an alleviation, 'Gusta, the girl from Port Victoria, Mrs. Tregaskiss' only other servant with the exception of Claribel the half-caste, was distinctly the reverse. 'Gusta was always dirty, always behind time, and always doing that which she ought not to do.

"Look here!" called out Tregaskiss; "I expect there 'll be drovers wanting grub. Those bulls have come at last, and I hear there's a mob of Cyrus Chance's camped down by the One Tree. Some of the men will be coming for

rations, and I shall turn them off pretty sharp, I can tell you. If this drought lasts there 'll be no end of travelling mobs poaching on my pasture, and I'm not going to stand it. It's like that beggarly old screw's impudence to camp his cattle and feed them at my expense."

"Am I to give out all the rations that are asked for?" Clare said. She was storekeeper in the absence of the new chums. "We shall run short of flour if the drays don't come soon."

"No, if we're short, tell 'em to do without—unless they like to pay double price. It's that—union, I suppose, that's keeping the drays. If any of my men have joined the strikers, by the Lord, I'll let 'em have it! Look sharp about lunch."

No drovers appeared, after all, which was perhaps as well; for when 'Gusta had been hustled through her preparations in the dining-room, largely assisted by her mistress, she had to go off to the neglected beds in the bachelors' quarters, and the half-caste nurse waited on husband and wife, and on the new chum, a sly, uncouth, much-mosquito-bitten youth, the son of a gentleman farmer in Norfolk, who helped with station accounts, carried rations to fencers, and stockmen, and people employed at the bores, as the artesian wells were called, and learned what is called "colonial experience," in exchange for the privilege of making himself useful. Gilbert Shand was a trial, but Clare was obliged to own that he might have been more objectionable, as a third person breaking upon the conjugal *tête-à-tête*, the second "knockabout" young man being nearly always away at an out-station. Shand was not talkative, and Tregaskiss' ill temper he seemed to take as a matter of course, and was at least not officious in sympathy, when it placed Clare in an uncomfortable position.

Tregaskiss was particularly surly to-day. Perhaps he was feeling the effect of comparative abstinence. He had

refrained, just of late, from his morning "nips." He ate little, swore at the flies and the heat, groaned over the salt beef, abused his wife for not inventing some new way of doing up the eternal junk. He was sure that Mrs. Carmody or Mrs. Cusack could have given her receipts, and worried his pet grievances just now, the drought and the travelling mobs, as a dog might worry a dry bone. Mr. Shand only aggravated matters by remarking that it had looked like a storm that morning. Had he not learned yet that the rising and passing of early storm-clouds was the most certain sign of a long-continued drought? If it went on much longer the cattle would be dying by hundreds, starved in the plains, and logged in the mud of drying water holes. Mr. Shand added further fuel in the shape of an ingenuous observation that Cyrus Chance was securing himself against losses by selling off as many as possible of his "store" and fat cattle, and that it was a pity they at Mount Wombo had lost a certain sale not long back through asking too big a price. Tregaskiss was infuriated at the recollection. It was like Cyrus Chance's mean, miserly ways; always taking advantage of his neighbours and trading on his money, with the meat-preserving people, to steal a march on the other Leura squatters, and undersell all who couldn't afford to send large droves to the southern market. It was through such dirty tricks that old Cyrus had made himself a millionaire, and so on, and so on.

Tregaskiss got so excited in his abuse of Mr. Chance that he did not notice the dogs barking in the yard, or the sound of a step in the back veranda. The doors stood wide open all through the establishment, and visitors had a way of presenting themselves without unnecessary formalities. Ning, who was seated opposite the door, jumped up with a cry, and drew general attention to a stranger on the threshold—a queer, fusty figure of a man, in a light brown alpaca coat frayed at the seams, brown breeches,

and an ancient cabbage-tree hat. The man was Cyrus Chance himself. He looked all brown together, for his face was much the shade of his coat, and his little goatee beard was grizzly-brown to match. He was very ugly, with small and grotesquely irregular features, smallpox-pitted, shrewd, blinking eyes, and a thin-lipped, cynical, and yet benevolent mouth. His smile betrayed him. In spite of all his endeavours, it refused to contradict many a secret charity which his friends could have discovered in no other way. Cyrus Chance was between sixty and seventy, hale for his age, though naturally frail. One shoulder was a little raised above the other, and he limped, the result of a fall in infancy. On the whole he gave one the impression of a creature only three parts human, the other elfish. He took off his cabbage-tree hat, making an awkward bow to Mrs. Tregaskiss, while he addressed her husband without looking at him. That was a peculiarity of Mr. Chance's. He avoided meeting the eyes of a person he did not like; the world said in consequence that he was shifty in his dealings, and always on the lookout to get the better of his acquaintances. His voice had an odd accent, something between the Scotch and the Australian.

"Well, Mr. Tregaskiss," he said, "I'm thinking there's truth in the proverb about listeners never hearing any good of themselves. I'll assure you, sir, that my beasties are close penned in the sandy pocket by the crossing, where there's not a blade of grass if they wanted it, poor de'ils! and we're not requiring any rations just now. I'm obliged to you, for I guessed that you'd be asking a good price, and I'd be a poorer man this day if I hadna always taken thought to provide against contingencies of that sort. It was thinking of Ning that made me bring a wee bag of hominy, for your drays won't be here yet awhile, I'm thinking, Mr. Tregaskiss."

Clare had risen. "That was very good of you, Mr. Chance," she said, with heightened colour.

The old man gave her a contorted smile and patted Ning's head. Tregaskiss had got up too, and came forward with outstretched hand and a manner of noisy, if deprecating, cordiality.

"How are you, my dear sir? Yes, it's the old story of the eavesdropper, eh! Deuced bad luck that you should hit off the moment like that! But you are so confoundedly prosperous that you can make allowance for a hot-headed fellow down in the mouth and worried to death, so that he's ready to strike out at whatever comes within reach. Just heard of your travelling mob and the sale you've made. By Jove! don't I wish I had had the chance! Come along! don't bear us all a grudge for my fit of ill-temper."

"No, I will not do that, Mr. Tregaskiss," replied the old man rather grimly.

"Sit down and have some grub, though it isn't first-class. I have to be off to the bore presently, but Clare will look after you."

"I think I will not accept your hospitality in the way of eating, Mr. Tregaskiss; but I shall be pleased to have a talk with the mistress."

"What a rum fellow you are! I believe you have made a vow not to break bread in my house. What did you mean by saying that the drays wouldn't be here yet awhile? You've heard no bad news about them, I hope."

"I have heard there's been a detachment of police sent to Ilgandah, and that the strikers are calling the men out everywhere and threatening to shoot all teams that are on the road. I doubt but it will go hard with Cusack of Brinda, and such of the squatters 'round as haven't got themselves too well liked among the labour men."

"I should say I was as popular as any squatter 'round," observed Tregaskiss complacently. "I've always been willing to give every man his due, and what was fair in

the way of a nip occasionally. No, I shouldn't care to stand in Cusack's shoes, but I'm pretty safe myself."

"Well, I don't know that I'd go the length of saying as much as that," sardonically remarked the millionaire. "I'd not trust myself to measure any man's due according to his own survey, let alone his grog."

Tregaskiss gave an appreciatory guffaw at the old man's humour. He had in the meantime poured himself out a glass of spirits, which he drank standing.

"Not bad, Chance! not at all bad! Well, I must be off! Have a nip, won't you? I don't believe all those stories about your being a teetotaler."

"No, I thank you," replied Chance, not corroborating or contradicting the inference.

"Then I'll leave you to the missus. Come along, Shand! I hope you have got the pack ready and the horses in the yard."

CHAPTER XII.

OLD CYRUS CHANCE.

Cyrus Chance was the millionaire of the Leura. No one knew how rich he was. He had cattle and sheep stations scattered over three colonies; he had a share in a gold mine; he had sugar plantations up north and flour mills down south; he was said to own a great meat-freezing establishment and to have investments in Fiji and the South Sea Islands. There were all sorts of stories afloat about his great wealth and his eccentric ways. No doubt both were exaggerated, but there was no doubt that he might, had he chosen, have been a social and financial power in any great capital. He might have lapped himself in luxury, might have drunk the beverages of emperors, and feasted at banquets that would have satisfied the epicures of an older civilisation. He might have bought the love of women, as he might have bought anything else that pleased him. He might have satiated himself with all the material pleasures of existence had he so willed. But he did none of these things—would not have known how to set about doing them. He lived like a miser, fed on stockman's most frugal fare, wore the shabbiest clothes, and appeared to revel in personal hardship. He avoided even bush society, and for that reason preferred to bury himself on the Leura for the greater part of the year, managing his station there, and having the name of driving a harder bargain than any squatter round. It was told of him that he had never in his life tasted wine or spirits, smoked tobacco, or kissed a woman except his mother. There was

only one woman it seemed from whom he did not fly, and that was Mrs. Tregaskiss.

He spent an hour or two occasionally at Mount Wombo, and talked to her all the time. He never came of set purpose, but made an excuse to halt on his way to and from Port Victoria. If it ever chanced that he had to stay a night he camped out. That was another of his peculiarities. He would not sleep under the roof or eat the food of a man whom he disliked; and he cordially disliked Keith Tregaskiss. This might be inferred from the fact that he usually timed his visits when the master of Mount Wombo was absent.

When Mrs. Tregaskiss and Cyrus Chance were left alone, she took him round by the front veranda to her little drawing-room, begging him to excuse her minding baby while the half-caste had dinner, and, before she established herself on the sofa with her child, made Ning pull forward the most comfortable of the armchairs, and herself took his hat from him.

Ning and old Cyrus Chance were great friends. He generally had some goodies in his pocket for her—cheap store lollipops, but none the less acceptable to Ning. She amused the old man with her queer gabble. He was well up in the blacks' phrases, and delighted when she answered him aptly.

"*Nja ninda gulurdil*" (You are my love), said the old man.

"*Guiyungun njali*" (We belong to one another), promptly returned Ning.

The old man's grimness relaxed, he seated himself and looked round with a grunt of satisfaction, while Ning sang black songs to the baby.

"Now, I always say, Mistress Tregaskiss, that your sitting-room is just an example of what can be done with nought but taste and little cost. I can't make it out. At home I'm all heat and glare and flies, and whatever I do there's

not a chair that gives one a resting feeling. And here, no matter how the sun blazes, it's always shady and comfortable, and not that abominable swarm of sticky insects buzzing round. And then there's just an armchair that nips one back in the right place, and just a homey feel over everything. Yet I shouldn't say now that you'd spent a ten-pound note on the room—none of the Brinda Plains fal-las and grandeur. Lord, I abominate them—and that talking woman who wants to manage the district! What is it, Mrs. Tregaskiss, that makes the home. Is it the children, or is it you? It aint the mon."

"It's keeping the blinds down, Mr. Chance, and fly-papers about, and it's cushions of the wild-ducks' feathers that I bribe the men to bring me, and it's flowers and photographs and all the rest. I've got a new photograph I want to show you—one that I found here when I came back, just done up and not a word to tell me anything about the sender, except that I suppose from the dress that her husband has died."

Clare took a large Mendelssohn photograph from a table near. It gave the suggestion of a youthful, but chastened and modern, Mary Stuart, on account, principally, of the long, rich black robe with hanging sleeves,—no doubt Jay's latest design in mourning tea-gowns,—and a coif-like cap surmounting the crinkly, parted hair, which Clare had been some time in discovering was emblematic of matrimonial bereavement. The mixture of medievalism and modernity, of suffering and frivolity, and of coquetry combined with a certain spirituality gave the picture a peculiar fascination.

Mr. Chance examined it carefully, holding it away from his eyes and then close to them, putting it down and taking it up again as if he were loth to turn from it.

"That's a curious face," he said at last. "I've never seen one in a picture like it. It makes me think of 'Fair Ines.'"

"Fair Ines!" Clare repeated, in some surprise. She had not imagined that Mr. Chance would know anything about Hood's poem.

He repeated softly with his uncultured intonation:

"'Oh, saw ye not Fair Ines?
She's gone into the west
To dazzle when the sun is down
And rob the world of rest,'"

and added: "You'll think it queer, perhaps, Mistress Tregaskiss, that an old, stingy, deformed bushman like me should have any romantic notions about heroines, of novels and poetry?"

"I don't know," Claire answered. "I fancied somehow that you didn't go in much for reading. I don't know why."

"What else should you fancy. I've never had any education. I was a working-lad that ran away from home, and I've toiled with the sweat of my brow for all I've got together. But I will say, mistress, that we bushmen owe a debt of gratitude to the Chambers firm for their spread of cheap literature. Where would I have been to start with if it hadn't been for 'Chambers's Information for the People.'"

"And the heroines, Mr. Chance?"

"Not the ones in novels," returned Chance decidedly. "I never wanted nought to do with them—they were a poor, fainting, whimpering lot. It's the woman in the bit songs, and lines of poetry with a tune on them going straight to the heart that fetched me; and Fair Ines was one of those. I read a sort of an essay by a very clever man, though I doubt me he's misguided in his politics, in *Scribner's Magazine* the other day. It was called 'Three Dream Heroines,' and one was Sally in our Alley, the nice, honest, homely thing that I'd have found a touch feckless and silly, I'm thinking; and another was Annabel Lee—who died

young, and I'm thinking, too, that if she had lived to keep house, he mightn't have set such store by her. And then there was Fair Ines, who don't come into the list of women at all, somehow. She's the queen of another world, and she's just the embodiment of all one ever dreamed, and told nobody—a creature to be dazzled by, but not to be made afeared of—she's too kind and gracious and winsome for that; who'd ride along and smile, and smile, and make the heart of man glad for no more than having looked upon her face. Not an angel; oh, no, Mistress Tregaskiss, I don't hold by angels—not in this world, anyhow. Salt junk is more satisfying than pickled saints. But just Fair Ines!"

"And you've never seen a real 'Fair Ines,' Mr. Chance?"

"Well, Mistress Tregaskiss, you yourself are the nearest approach to Fair Ines I've come across yet; but Fair Ines wouldn't have married Keith Tregaskiss and settled down on the Leura."

A rush of emotion overpowered her. "Oh, how you understand me!" she cried, and impulsively put out her hand to him. But the queer old man did not take it. He only leaned back in his chair and looked at her with his blinking eyes and his odd smile, and then, without saying a word, deliberately took out a red bandanna, folded it in four, and blew his nose with it so loudly that the baby gave a feeble cry. Clare laughed outright, almost hysterically.

"I wonder," she said presently, "if you'll ever see Gladys."

"Gladys!"

"That's the lady whose photograph I showed you; she was a friend of mine long before I was married. I have not seen her for eleven years. She married, herself—an old man, who, I suppose, is dead, and Gladys is rich—and free."

"I don't want to see her," said Mr. Chance, "if she married an old man for his money."

"No, no," put in Clare. "She was very fond of him; and I heard that she nursed him devotedly."

"I wouldn't cross a log to see a woman," pursued Mr. Chance. "Why, no, I rather think I'd swim a dozen creeks to get away from her."

He used his bandanna again, more gently, and resumed his study of Clare's drawing-room.

"It didn't run to a ten-pound note, now, did it?"

"I don't suppose it did. Keith papered the walls and made the little tables."

"Did he now?" There was a note of incredulity in the old man's voice. "Well, I shouldn't have suspected he'd take that trouble for ye. It must have been a long time ago."

"It was soon after we married." Clare laughed again. "The reason why we are so smart is because I brought some red cloth and art muslin from Port Victoria, and Mr. Shand helped me to furbish things up a bit."

The old man gave her a nod of approbation. "Well, your a fine economical housewife, Mistress Tregaskiss; and it 'ud be a pleasure to a body to save for you. There's but poor joy to me in thinking of those that count on coming after me—my brother's children, with their airs and graces and flash ways. I'm sorry your not my kin."

"I'm sorry too, Mr. Chance."

It did not seem to occur to the millionare that want of kinship was not necessarily a bar to the desire which had dimly presented itself to his imagination. There was a silence, during which he gazed at Clare, now occupied with the aroused infant.

"So that's the youngster!" said Cyrus Chance. "A girl too! What did you go and have her for? It's a mistake."

"Yes, I think it is," answered Clare gravely.

"What's the good of making another leg-rope to keep you bailed up in your pen here. That's what children are

—nought but leg-ropes. Look at the Carmodys. He might strike out and say 'Bo' to the bank ; and she could go teaching, or charing, or into a hospital, if it wasn't for those bairnies. Do ye give the creature the breast ? " he added, with abrupt directness.

"I did for a little while, but I'm not strong enough."

Cyrus Chance gave a grunt. " You're wrong, mistress ; it's an outlet. There's woman's feelings that 'ull flow in mother's milk ; and that, when they're kept corked, are apt to go sour and sickly, and prove pernicious to the system. If you were my daughter,—and thank the Lord ! I've not got a daughter,—I'd say to you : ' Nurse your babies, and turn 'em into blessings, more-like than curses.' Besides, mother's milk is soothing to heart wounds, and has a sovereign virtue. I've found that out for all that I'm a bachelor and a woman-hater. D'ye think I'm an old fool, now, Mistress Tregaskiss ? "

" I think you are a very wise man," said Clare, with a break in her voice ; " and you are very good to me."

" Well, never mind. I've brought a present for you—thinking of the baby. It's in my pack, outside, with the hominy for Ning. If ye'll permit me, I'll go and fetch it in."

He stopped at the door, and addressed her solemnly :

" Look ye here, Mistress Tregaskiss. You'll have heard a lot of stories about old money-grubbing Cyrus Chance, and about his stinginess and his cranks ; and some of these stories may be true, and some of them mayn't. But there's one tale you'll never have heard, and never will hear, for it 'ud just be looked upon as a miracle, right through Australia. That is that old Cyrus Chance ever, in the whole course of his natural existence, ever gave or was likely to give a present to a woman. There ! "

He did not wait for her reply, but hobbled out, the inequality of his shape making his step uneven, and heightening the gnome-like impression his appearance somehow

made. Clare laughed on with a certain mournful amusement, inexpressibly touched the while, and wondering of what his present might be. She remembered a story Mrs. Cusack had told her, of how she, being secretary for a sort of Creche hospital for the children of immigrants out of work, had written to the rich man of the district asking for a subscription. Mrs. Cusack had recited to her the terse reply, which she recollected word for word :

"MADAM :

"Yours of —— date received. *Re* Children's Hospital : Can imagine that immigrants' babies require nursing, but cannot imagine what concern that is of

"Yours faithfully,

"CYRUS CHANCE."

She remembered, too, Mrs. Cusack's sequel to the story; her relation of how, some little while later, an envelope containing ten ten-pound notes had been received by the secretary of the Creche, and generally ascribed to the repentant generosity of Cyrus Chance, though an unfortunate clergyman who had ventured to thank the miser-millionaire, when halting for a night at his Leura station, had been there and then packed out of the house for impertinence.

"It was exactly like him," Clare was saying to herself, when the old man appeared again, with three fat black bottles, red-labelled, under each arm, and a small bag of hominy in one hand. He laid the bottles solemnly, one by one, down by the sofa.

"That's the best bottled stout, mistress, and I beg you'll do me the favour to take a glass when you feel low. Ye'll not require it so much, perhaps, as you're not nursing, and if you cork the bottle tight and turn it upside down the stuff 'll keep."

She thanked him. He was not content till he had seen

her put the bottles away in her store-cupboard in the dining-room. She heard incidentally, afterward, that he had come round by Brinda Plains for the purpose of buying them at Cusack's store, and had haggled for quarter of an hour over the price.

Having done his errand, Mr. Chance prepared to depart. The bellowing of beasts and cracking of stock whips was heard afar off in the plain, and their owner could not resist leading Mrs. Tregaskiss to the veranda,—whence through one of the gidia clearings she could see the red heaving mass of cattle as it passed,—and descanting upon the economical management of his droving operations, and the sinful waste of Leura squatters in general, who employed twice as many "hands" as were needed, and did not "dodge about" and surprise their travelling stock as he himself was in the habit of doing.

"Keeps 'em from taking a night on the burst. What's the meaning of so many mobs breaking in The Grave pocket?" he said. "It isn't the 'possums, and it isn't the scrubbers; it's the grog shanty, ten miles off, that does it; and my men know I'm as likely as not to turn up the night they're camped there, and I shan't have to go to the grog shanty to look after them. They don't suspect I'm here to-day—came across country on purpose. Camped out last night at an old sheep-station and saved hotel expenses, and got supper out of Cusack for nothing—off the pumpkins in the sheep yard. Many 's the time I've camped out, outside a field of Indian corn, and made my meal from green cobs. That's the way to save money, and to make money, Mistress Tregaskiss. It's the pence, and not the pounds, that does it. There's always truth in old saws."

She went out with him to the yard and saw him restrap his valise, a good deal thinner now that the bottles had been taken out of it. He showed her how he had wrapped them in his flannel shirts to keep them from breaking. "It's good stuff, Mistress Tregaskiss—now mind ye take a

sup when ye're low," was his parting admonition, and he rode off, as proud and pleased with his generosity as though he had handed her the bank acquittance of Tregaskiss' debt—which, indeed, he might have done, she thought whimsically to herself, with even less inconvenience than the buying of those six bottles had cost him.

Two men of disagreeable aspect, whom she had not before noticed, were loitering about the fence. They were on foot, and explained that they had left their horses with a black boy, were bound for Port Victoria, and wanted to buy rations. The elder, and evidently more important of the two, was a rakish, determined-looking person, dressed like a stockman in shabby boots and dirty shirt and riding breeches; and yet, Clare felt sure, not a stockman. He did not speak uncivilly, but there was something furtive in his expression, and she did not like the way his eyes wandered about, as if he were taking stock of everything, and wished that Keith or Mr. Shand was at home, or that she had kept Cyrus Chance a little longer.

"I am sorry," she said, in answer to the man's request for rations, "but we are short of flour ourselves, our drays having been delayed. Mr. Tregaskiss is not at home, and I could not let you have any during his absence."

"Oh, the drays have been delayed!" repeated the elder man, exchanging a glance, which Clare did not like either, with his companion. "But I suppose you are not short of meat, ma'am, and that you can let us have a ration of junk? We've got money to pay for it."

"I can let you have some meat," she answered. "Wait till I get the key of the store."

She went into the kitchen and called Ah Sin to come and weigh the meat for her, but Ah Sin had chosen the opportunity to pay a visit to his brother Chinaman at the garden by the lagoon, and 'Gusta, too, was nowhere to be found. Clare delayed indoors a little while, hoping that somebody might come back, but no one came; and when she went out

again, the men looked impatient and angry. They came to meet her at the veranda.

"I believe you've got plenty of tobacco in the store?" the elder man said, with a touch of insolence in his tone. "We should be glad of a fig or two."

"I am not sure."

Clare began to feel frightened of the men, and wondered if they could be strikers, or perhaps bushrangers—though these were not as yet known on the Leura; and what she should do if they had threatened her. How had they found out there was tobacco in the store? As a matter of fact, there was enough of everything except flour and sugar. She was a courageous woman, and not inclined to knuckle under, but she was quite aware that to refuse rations in the bush, without valid reason, was to go against the Australian conventions of hospitality. On the whole, she thought it would be wisest to assume that the men were well-disposed, and to give them what they wanted.

"I can let you have some tobacco," she answered; and, walking across the yard with a dignity which had its effect upon the man, for he made way for her and changed his aggressive manner, she unlocked a door near the kitchen, which had a great rusty padlock, and entered a dim raftered room, where a tarantula had his web in a corner, and cockroaches crawled out from the crevices—the usual bush store: cobwebby shelves stacked with groceries, clothing for men, blankets and saddle-lining, drums of tobacco, kegs of rum, a bottle or two of Steven's Red Blister and Farmers' Friend, and so on; the usual rough dresser and scales, and the bin for flour which Mr. Shand had left open, and where the weevils made black spots upon the caked flour in the corner of the lid; and another bin with compartments for the moist black ration sugar, and for a lighter and better sort. On the dais, which, after the arrival of drays, would be piled with bags of flour, there was nothing now but empty sacks folded. Clare separated and weighed

some figs of tobacco, which she handed the man ; also a bottle of pickles for which they asked. Then she took them to the meat store, another low dark room, with wire netting stretched across the narrow window, an earthen floor, and dripping hides nailed against the walls, two large casks of brine in which the meat was kept, heaps of coarse salt lying about, and pieces of more freshly salted beef stacked upon the long wooden board on which the salting was done. Clare poked out a piece of beef from one of the casks, hooked it on the rusty steelyards, herself carefully adjusting the balance. It was a curious occupation for a woman so beautiful and so refined—for the admired Miss Gardyne of days gone by. The men slouched against the door watching her, and perhaps something of this sort flashed through their minds. One of them, at any rate, asked respectfully if he could not help her. She let him take the piece of beef off the steelyards, and it was just then that a horse's hoofs sounded, and she had a vision of someone hastily dismounting—a gentleman whom she supposed to be her husband or Mr. Shand returned from the bore.

But it was the voice of neither of these that bade the kangaroo dogs "lie down," and called out to one of the strangers before addressing Mrs. Tregaskiss :

"Kelso, what are you doing here?"

The man sulkily turned and made a gesture of recognition. "No harm, Dr. Geneste, and I don't see, anyway, that it's your business. The meat is eight pounds all but an ounce, Mrs. Tregaskiss, and there's the money for it and for the pickles and tobacco."

He laid a little heap of silver and copper coins beside the steelyards.

"Stop a moment," said Geneste. "I think that money can go back into your pouch, and the meat into the cask again. Mrs. Tregaskiss, allow me to settle this for you."

He lifted his hat as he came to the meat store door.

"The men are strike delegates, and I'm sure your hus-

band wouldn't be pleased at your serving them with rations. Do you go in. Kelso and I have had dealings together before, and I've got a word to say to him now. Stand back, man, and let the lady pass."

Kelso obeyed with a cowed air. Clare, too, was only too glad to do what he told her. He held the door for her to go through, flung the money back to the strikers, and then closed the door, shutting in the piece of beef and the tobacco and pickles which had been standing on the dresser, turned the key in the padlock, and then walked with Mrs. Tregaskiss across the yard, keeping his hat in his hand with an exaggerated deference that touched her to the quick. She knew that he had taken in the whole picture of the squalid little place, and of herself standing by the steelyards selling meat to these horrible men. It seemed her fate that he should discover her in humiliating positions, though in truth there was nothing wonderful in his appearing at that critical moment. His visit had been in contemplation, and expected day by day, and this was the natural hour for him to arrive at the station. Bush travellers always time themselves to reach their destination at sundown.

"I believe those men are scouts," he said. "Kelso is a bad lot and at the root of all these labour troubles. I've no doubt he knew that Tregraskiss wasn't in the way, and I only wonder he wasn't insolent. I'll pack him off."

But the men were out of the yard when he turned back to the meat store. Kelso had not waited for an encounter with the explorer. Geneste, old bushman as he was, unstrapped his valise, took the saddle from his horse, and washed its back before turning it out. There was not even a black boy to be seen. Only Ah Sin, in his white frock, was visible halfway down to the lagoon, his arms full of green stuff.

"I'm glad she has vegetables, at any rate," thought Geneste. "My Heavens! what a place for such a woman to call her home!"

CHAPTER XIII.

BLANCHARD'S ROMANCE.

The sun had set in the midst of a thick storm-cloud—those clouds alas! which did not bring the much-needed rain, and were, indeed, as Tregaskiss had said, the sure sign of a continued drought. The air was hot and heavy, and insects swarmed in myriads. When 'Gusta brought in the smoking dish of corned beef and summoned the party from the veranda to dinner, Clare moved the lamp to the side table so that they might be able to eat without the risk of winged and crawling things dropping into their plates.

Tregaskiss and Shand had returned from the bore, having fallen in with Mr. Blanchard on the way. He was sent over from Brinda Plains with a message from Mr. Cusack, a warning that the union men were out, that there was a rumour of a woolshed having been burned down belonging to a sheep-owner beyond Ilgandah, and an intimation from the authorities that each squatter would be expected to keep arms, horses, and men in readiness for the protection of the district in case of a general riot. It was evident that Mr. Cusack, bully and blusterer as he was, had got into what Blanchard, in his soft voice and deliberate English intonation, called a blue funk. Tregaskiss laughed and made light of danger. To be sure he was not a sheep-owner, and had less to fear, but Clare rejoiced in the reflection that, at any rate, physically speaking, he was not a coward. She thought of her whimsical fancy under the stars of a Berserker past. The fighting blood rose in him. When he heard of the Kelso episode of the afternoon, he

was infuriate at the notion that the labour delegates had escaped, and was half inclined to rise up, pursue, and smite them.

"What could you do?" said Geneste quietly. "They only wanted to buy rations--ostensibly. You can't put them into chains for that."

"It's d——d unpleasant to have the brutes skulking round," said Tregaskiss, in his rough, outspoken way.

"Extremely unpleasant for your wife," returned Geneste, his eyes following Clare as she moved about the dining-room. "She might have been in an awkward position this afternoon if Kelso had shown impertinence," he went on. "Excuse my saying, Tregaskiss, that in these unsettled times I think she ought not to be left without a man on the place."

"There were Ah Sin and Li Hong."

"Oh, Chinamen!" Geneste's shrug was eloquent.

"Well, come in to dinner," said Tregaskiss.

He hurried to the store cupboard, returning presently with a bottle of whiskey and one of Cyrus Chance's bottles of porter, asked his wife where the porter had come from, and laughed immoderately, calling in the others, as Clare reluctantly told how Chance had made her a present. Cyrus Chance the miser making anyone a present! The idea was too comical! Mr. Blanchard supplemented her version by an account of old Cyrus' visit to the Brinda store. Tregaskiss jeered at the old man's meanness. Had it been a case of port wine, the gift might have been worth a fuss. Clare winced at the various remarks.

Even Dr. Geneste, to her fancy, stuck a jarring note. He had a story to tell of having once discovered the millionaire, under an assumed name, among the steerage passengers on a coasting boat. "He was sneaking up to one of his stations, Mrs. Tregaskiss, so that he might pounce upon the manager unawares. As it was, he did catch the poor fellow napping, and dismissed him forthwith."

"Which proves that Mr. Chance had reason for his precautions," answered Clare coldly.

"You are a friend of old Cyrus'?" said Geneste quickly, feeling that he had made a mistake.

"Hallo, here's Hansen!" broke in Tregaskiss. "Didn't expect you so soon. What luck have you had?"

Mr. Hansen was the young man from the out-station. He was a colonial by birth—a big, raw-boned, red-haired, large-limbed creature, with mild blue eyes and a shaggy, ugly face. Ning, who adored him, flew into his arms, crushing her white frock and red sash.

"Oh, mine cobbon glad to see you, Hanny! Mine velly glad!" correcting herself conscientiously. "You been bring me quantongs?"

"All right, Pickaninny! I've got something better than quantongs to show you, after dinner. Well, you see, boss, I thought I'd try and push for a civilised Sunday, now the missus is back. I hope you are better, Mrs. Tresgaskiss, though you don't look too jolly well. I'm at your orders. If the boss will let me stop over Monday, I'll scrub out a room, turn laundress, or do anything else you like."

"Oh, she's all right!" interrupted Tregaskiss. "How have you got on with the stock?"

"Pretty fair. Branded one hundred and seventy calves from the Furella country. We rather did a record yesterday. Branded, turned the beasts up to All's Well camp, killed and salted, and were done in time for a bogey in the creek before dinner. That was pretty good, for the cattle don't draft well through Gil-Gil yard."

"Oh, that be blowed, for a yarn!" cried Tregaskiss. "You're used to the yard here; but I'd sooner draft through Gil-Gil yard myself. Seen many fats? The butchers may be up any day now."

"Well, you'll have a job to get the number of fat cows," replied Hansen. "But we're keeping you, Mrs. Tregaskiss. Oh, how do you do, Dr. Geneste!

Shand is cleaning himself, boss; you'll not wait for him."

"Have a nip before you begin," said Tregaskiss, offering the whiskey impartially. "It will give you an appetite. But the missus won't let you drink it neat, Hansen. There is cold water out in the bag."

"Mrs. Tregaskiss, that's a libel," protested the young man. "I never take my grog neat. Look here, boss! big as you are, I don't mind having a turn with the gloves and fighting it out."

Tregaskiss liked the implied deference of the title "boss." Mr. Hansen was a favourite of his. To-night he was boisterously good-humoured. They all sat down to the meal, which was half tea, half dinner, most of the gentlemen beginning with a "nip" of whiskey, and ending with tea, which Clare dispensed. Presently Mr. Shand appeared in a clean suit of white duck. Dr. Geneste was also in white duck, and wore a starched shirt. The other two had on flannel shirts and light alpaca coats. Clare noticed that Geneste's sleeve-links were fine "Alexanders," and that he had a curious-looking antique coin hanging from his watch chain. She was a woman to whom such trifles appealed; they added to the individuality he was assuming in her eyes. He told her that in old days he had indulged a fad for collecting coins, and hoped that she would soon see his collection at Darra, as well as some Egyptian scarabei which he had there as well.

"You ought to be interested in Egyptian relics," he said. "I don't know whether you have been told that your face is of the old Egyptian type?"

"I have always wished very much to go to Egypt," she said.

They fell into talk, taking a leap far from the Leura. When with him each fresh time she had the feeling that they were resuming the thread of some former intimate acquaintanceship, and that already they stood apart in a

world which was not the world, even of Helen Cusack. Not for years had she looked so handsome or so interested, and this fact struck Tregaskiss as he looked at her across the table, and annoyed him. He interrupted the conversation by asking Geneste some questions about the fattening properties of Darra-Darra, and the talk became general again and confined within the range of Leura interests. Hansen broke in :

"Do you remember that big roan bullock, boss, that Joe lost on Brigalow Creek. Well, I got him, but he was as wild as a scrubber, and I let him go again, by Lake Eurella. I say, Mrs. Tregaskiss, you should just see the lake now. There must have been a lot of rain up there last year, though it was pretty dry down here. Of course it's shallow, but it looks like an inland sea. If you stand on one side, you can hardly make out the other. Covered with birds it is. There are thousands of swans, and ducks,—and the pelicans! My word! I've brought Ning a whole winter frock of skins. I wish you could feel the fresh salt breeze, Mrs. Tregaskiss ; it would just set you. By Jove! it would be a sound 'spec' to put up a hotel and advertise the lake as the sanitarium of the West."

"Wait till there comes a three years' drought," said Geneste. "I've seen the lake perfectly dry, with a bed of what I thought was course sand, till I examined it and found a mass of tiny shells. Have you ever been to Lake Eurella, Mrs. Tregaskiss?"

"Never," she answered.

Hansen proposed that they should get up a picnic ; it only meant a night's camping out and good horses. Blanchard said that the Cusacks had been talking of an expedition. Miss Cusack was very anxious for it ; and then Geneste suggested that the three stations should join and carry out the plan.

"Yes, when we're less short-handed, and the unionists

have settled down, and Cusack has got over his funk of being attacked," put in Tregaskiss.

The labour troubles came into discussion again, and Mr. Blanchard reported anew rumours from beyond Ilgandah. Clare was struck by some remarks which the young man made, which showed a thoughtful grasp of the labour problem, and an intelligent sympathy with the working class. She saw that he was much older and more developed than she had at first supposed. At Brinda Plains he had seemed to her retiring and almost insignificant. This she now realised had been the result of the Cusack's robust chaff. Relieved from the oppression, he showed himself a gentleman of culture and character. There was something peculiarly attractive about his smile and in a certain "other-worldliness" he seemed to exhale.

Later on she spoke about him to Dr. Geneste. They had climbed the little stair to the upper veranda. Tregaskiss and the two Mount Wombo young men remained, deep in station matters. Mr. Blanchard had gone to the bachelors' quarters for his pipe. Geneste followed Mrs. Tregaskiss to the further end of the veranda, where he went to replenish one of the camp ovens, kept stoked with burning sandal-wood boughs. This sandal-wood drove away the mosquitoes and gave forth an agreeable odour. Down below, beyond the garden fence, half a dozen horses followed the example of the humans, and gathered for protection from insects round a smoking rubbish heap. The moon was rising over the lagoon, and the clouds had disappeared, the heavens showing deep blue and starlit. A blacks' camp was pitched at the further end of the lagoon, the shape of the gunyas and an occasional black form standing out in the moonlight, and now and then there would float up echoes of a dog's bark or a corobboree tune. Beyond the opening of the lagoon stretched the vast plain, which to Clare had always something mystic in its dim expanse ; and the semicircle of which the lagoon

formed the base was closed in by melancholy gidia scrub. Geneste helped Clare to put more boughs into the little furnace, and the odorous smoke thickened. The door into her room stood open—he could tell that it was her room by the light of a lamp turned low, and by the baby's cot, round which mosquito netting was drawn close. She left him for a few moments to peer through the netting and assure herself that all was well.

"I always feel nervous," she said, returning and seating herself on a canvas chair near him, "since once we found a scorpion under Ning's pillow."

He leaned against the railings, studying her profile as it showed itself against the dark slab wall.

"Tell me about Mr. Blanchard," she asked suddenly. "I didn't notice him much at Brinda. I thought he was only the ordinary new chum, and now he strikes me as being quite different and decidedly interesting."

"Yes, he is interesting. I found that out one night over our pipes at Darra, when he opened himself a bit to me."

Mrs. Tregaskiss waited, not liking to appear intrusive.

"Aren't you going to smoke?" she asked presently.

"You don't mind? It keeps the mosquitoes away, anyhow." He prepared and lighted his pipe, puffing meditatively for a few moments.

"There's a lot more in Blanchard than appears on the surface," Geneste went on. "He doesn't show himself as he is, in the Cusack atmosphere; unless," he added, "Miss Cusack's womanly sympathy brings out something of the real man. I can hardly imagine how that could fail to have effect."

"Yes," Clare assented vaguely, slightly jarred by the allusion to Miss Cusack. "Tell me something about him, if you may."

"He was a clergyman, educated for and thrown into a family living. It seems to have been something of the Robert Elsmere story. He couldn't preach what he did

not believe, and proclaimed himself an agnostic from the family pulpit. Of course he left the church. There was a great quarrel with his father, who disinherited him. Then——"

"He came out here, I suppose."

"No; he worked for a bit in the East End of London, and was in the thick of that big strike of the dockers. Now I'm getting on to the confidential part of the opening out, Mrs. Tregaskiss, and that, as you can guess, means a woman. When an Englishman over twenty-five takes to the bush, in nine cases out of ten a woman is at the bottom of it."

She longed to ask him whether the statement held good in his own case, but instead, she remarked:

"I suppose the Cusacks don't know anything of that story of his leaving the Church. If they did, they would hardly chaff him about being like a bishop. I understand now why he winced."

"Oh, no," answered Geneste. "I have not mentioned it to anyone but you." Clare's heart warmed with satisfaction: he had not then made a confidante of Helen. "Mrs. Cusack is too kind-hearted to knowingly give anyone pain. I don't think—in fact I am sure that Blanchard would not like it to come to their ears. He has only been there a short time,—came on a mere outside introduction,—and does not wish his antecedents gossiped about. Though he spoke of them to me, he is curiously reticent. I now speak of him to you with the less hesitation, because he happened to say that you were a woman whom a man instinctively trusts. I have no doubt that some day, if you care to hear it, he will tell you his own story."

"I am glad he thinks I can be trusted," she said, and was silent for a minute or two. The discussion at the other end of the veranda had become noisy. It rang monotonous changes on the eternal subject of cattle, and on the sharp practices of Cyrus Chance, and the brag of Mr.

Cusack, and did not appear greatly to Mr. Blanchard's taste, for after joining in it for a few moments he strolled to the upper level toward his hostess and Dr. Geneste.

"I see you don't mind smoke, Mrs. Tregaskiss," he began, and added, with a certain shyness: "I wish you would let us see your drawing-room; we have been sitting all the time in the veranda, and I am told that it is so pretty and uncommon—like an English room. It would be nice to see an English room again."

Clare got up. "You shall see it, certainly; but mine isn't an English room at all; it's much more a barbaric one, with it's South-Sea Island things; and it isn't pretty either, and you mustn't expect anything fine like your grand Brinda Plains drawing-room. Ning and I always feel very humble when we come back after a visit there. Mine is only a collection of rubbish and home-made odds and ends, and no one admires it except Mr. Chance."

"I did not know," said Geneste, "that Cyrus Chance ever gave himself the opportunity of admiring a lady's drawing-room."

"Ah, as he put it to-day, the merit of mine lies in the fact that it can't have run over a ten-pound note," answered Mrs. Tregaskiss. "Come, we will have some music. Mr. Blanchard, you will sing to us."

She led the way to the lower building. The windows of the sitting-room were open front and back, and made it comparatively cool, and the dim light of two or three shaded lamps offered less attraction to the winged things than the unshielded one by which 'Gusta was clearing the dinner-table in the next room. The night was so still that, notwithstanding the complete draught, the lamps did not flare.

"It *is* a pretty room," said Blanchard. "I never saw one like it."

That was not surprising. Mrs. Tregaskiss had utilised homely material, which everyone else on the Leura would

have despised. Moreover, she had not learned how to mix colours in the Warraker studio for nothing. It was nearly all her own handiwork, and that of stray helpers in the shape of Chinamen, Kanaka boys, and good-natured stockmen and new chums. Tregaskiss' part was a fiction of his wife's generous imagination. At any rate, all trace of it had disappeared. The walls were of brown canvas, upon which was stretched South-Sea Island tapa, painted in queer barbaric patterns, orange, brown, and dull red and blue. Where the tapa ran short she had carried out a suggestion of it as background, in blue and ochreish red, and had fixed upon it spears, paddles, grotesque figureheads of canoes, shields, arrows, and all kinds of native weapons, and from the rough rafters which supported the inner-drawn canvas ceiling, she had hung a number of quaint South-Sea gourds. All these spoils had come from a trading vessel that had put into Port Victoria, and which Clare had boarded with her husband in search of a Kanaka servant. She had admired, bargained, and at last, to Keith's derisive amusement, purchased. The woodwork of the room was of brown wood, in its natural grain, and on her curtains Clare had embroidered barbaric designs to match the tapa. Matting covered the earthen floor, and on it lay rugs and a great hearth-rug of native dog skins. The big fireplace was stacked with melons, yellow and green, and banked by maiden-hair ferns. On each side were low, rudely manufactured sofas, their broad seats upholstered in a fine sort of South-Sea Island matting, with quantities of great downy cushions making big blotches of colour. There were books in plenty, cushioned squatters' chairs, and one or two good etchings,—survival of Queen's Gate days,—a writing table with English equipments, a little silver table, and many photographs. Among these, the big Mendelssohn portrait of Gladys Hilditch took a prominent place.

"It isn't a bit English, but it's arranged just like an English room," young Blanchard was conceding, when he

stopped suddenly, his gaze arrested by the photograph, which he looked at for a moment with mere curiosity, and then with a startled interest that made Clare wonder.

"Mrs. Tregaskiss," he exclaimed, his voice shaking in spite of his effort to control it, "who—where did you get this?"

Clare repeated the story of the photograph almost as she had told it to Cyrus Chance. "You know my friend, Mrs. Hilditch?" she asked unnecessarily, for the young man's pale face and glowing eyes, full of agitation, were a plain answer to her question.

"She—they had a house near my people," he stammered.

Clare pointed to the mourning dress. "Then you must have heard whether this means that she has lately had a great trouble."

"I—how should I know?" he said confusedly. "Do you mean that her husband is dead? Oh, no! He was not a young man, and when I knew them he was an invalid—creeping paralysis it was. But they said he would live for *years* and years, and not get any worse or any better. She was good to him, though he must have tried her greatly. I admired her for that."

Blanchard had finished his explanation in a mechanical manner.

"No," he added abruptly, "I don't know. I never hear from my people."

He turned away as he spoke, and stood for several minutes in silence, his back toward them. Geneste was watching Clare, trying to interpret the curious expression upon her face. It made him think of the wistful smile a lost spirit might wear, when watching the admission of a more fortunate soul into paradise. Then it changed into a look with something in it of self-horror. She caught Geneste's eyes. Her lips quivered, and her eyes pierced his with a reproachful gaze, which seemed to say: "Why are you always finding me out?"

"Won't you play something?" he asked, in quite a matter-of-fact tone. "Do, Blanchard, go and get some of your songs."

Clare sat down and struck a few wandering chords, running them into a sort of accompaniment. Blanchard, muttering something about "music" and his valise, disappeared.

"That was rather a facer for poor Blanchard," said Geneste.

"Do you mean that she—Gladys—was the woman?"

"I suppose so; he did not tell me her name, but the fact seems to speak of itself."

"Oh, no! I dare say he was in love with her, but not Gladys. She couldn't have cared for him."

"Why?"

"Oh, she wasn't like that! We—she looked upon that kind of thing as sacred. It was her ideal. She chose to give it up because she believed it unattainable and she wouldn't be contented with anything short of the best. Of course she never cared at all for poor Mr. Hilditch, but she was quite honest, and told him so."

"And you," he said, striking off the subject of Gladys and Blanchard—"was that why you married too? Had you given up your ideal because you believed it unattainable."

"No—I—yes. I gave it up. I don't know why you always make me tell you the truth. I am very glad I gave it up. An ideal is always safe—when it is never realised."

"You are wrong—like many a cynic," he said, in a low voice. "It is possible to realise one ideal on earth—the ideal of love. I wonder if you will ever find that out?"

"I hope not," she answered.

"If you do not," he went on, "you will have lived without experience of the one perfect human joy. If, on the other hand, you do find it out, you may be laying up for yourself the most exquisite of human pains. I don't know which to

hope for you, but I cannot feel that you will live out your life in ignorance."

She went on playing for a few minutes. Then she said with studied indifference, reverting to the former subject:

"I don't think Mr. Blanchard can have known Gladys Hilditch very intimately. If he had done so she would have spoken to him of me, and he would not have been so taken aback at the sight of her photograph in my house."

"Isn't that a feminine induction? When a man and a woman are very much engrossed with each other, they are apt to forget their friends, especially if they haven't met—the friends, I mean—for a long time."

"More than ten years," said Clare. "And Gladys is a bad correspondent."

"Were you greatly devoted to Mrs. Hilditch? I have heard you mention her before. Are you the kind of woman to be wholly devoted to another woman?"

"No. I don't think I was ever the kind of woman to be wholly devoted to anyone. But Gladys was the only real girl-friend I ever had."

"So you were always lonely," he said. "Lonely, grand, and mysterious, like the Sphinx of the desert." He broke off with a laugh that covered his romantic manner of speech. "I told you before that you were like the Sphinx."

"The sphinxes on the Embankment. Yes, people used to say I had their type of features. But I don't think there's anything else sphinx-like about me, Dr. Geneste. Life on the Leura doesn't suggest mysteries. For me, it's only a very dull round of"—she paused for an instant—"of commonplace duties."

"Performed with a brave smile, when you know, and I know, that your heart and intellect and soul must be enduring slow agonies of starvation. I once saw you unmasked, remember. There's no use in pretending."

Their eyes interchanged a look, and hers drooped.

"No," she answered, after a moment, "there's no use in pretending, and starvation of the soul *is* slow agony—as bad as physical starvation, and lasting much longer. But I suppose even that must come to an end some day. Don't talk of *me* any more."

Mr. Blanchard came in with a roll of music. If the sight of Gladys Hilditch's picture had caused him an emotion, he had pulled himself together by this time.

"I brought over two or three songs, Mrs. Tregaskiss, that I think you may like," he said composedly. "Perhaps you wouldn't mind trying over the accompaniments."

His eyes looked smarting and a little wild, Clare thought, but his lips were set very determinedly. "I wonder if he was really in love with Gladys," she said to herself.

CHAPTER XIV.

"ENGLISH MAIL."

SUNDAY morning was late and lazy at Mount Wombo, for everyone but its mistress and the faithful Hanny, as Ning called Mr. Hansen, who, true to his offer of help, appeared at the dairy door when Clare set to work on the milk pans. The excellent Ah Sin had no vocation here, and Mrs. Tregaskiss had long made the dairy one of her "duties." Tregaskiss lay in bed as long as was possible. When he appeared, he looked puffy, dull, and his eyes were bloodshot. From these signs Geneste drew his own conclusions, confirmed later by Hansen's remark that the boss had made rather a night of it, in talking "strike" and whetting his wrath against the strikers. Geneste had gone to bed before the others, and Blanchard had said good-night early, and had gone to smoke a pipe by the lagoons, and, his friend conjectured, to dream about Gladys Hilditch.

Mrs. Tregaskiss made tea, and was reserved and polite. She looked cool, pale, and calm in her gray cotton gown fashioned with a certain classical simplicity unknown on the Leura, where the ladies were given to furbelows and home-made copies of the plates in the *Queen*. Ning handed round the coffee cups, and chattered enough to hide her mother's preoccupation and Tregaskiss' morose silence. After breafast the men lounged about the lower veranda, smoked, read papers, and wrote letters in readiness for Jemmy Rodd, the mailman, who was expected that day. It was a relief to Blanchard to find that morning service was not read by either master or mistress, for he had suffered from the fuss and ceremony with which

"church"—obligatory upon all station hands—was conducted by the Cusacks. Clare held her own religious exercises in the veranda upstairs, where Geneste, dragged by Ning, found her giving instruction to Claribel, a half-caste gin from the camp called Lona, who was nursing a very young pickaninny, and a half-caste boy, son of one of the black boys and a white woman. She was dismissing her class when he came up, and as soon as her pupils had gone, she burst into a laugh of real merriment, almost the first he had heard from her lips.

"I must tell you something that Peter said just now!" she exclaimed. "Peter is the little half-caste boy, and he is ever so much sharper than either Lona or Claribel. Lona is not one of my regular pupils; she is really a Eungella black, and is over here with her tribe. I am trying to teach them a few elementary truths about astronomy, as well as a little othodox religion, and was explaining that as we revolved on our own axis, it was the same sun we saw every morning, whereupon Peter confounded me by remarking: 'My not think it much of that fellow God. What for he no make it new sun every morning? What for always use up old one?'"

"Hi, Clare!" shouted Tragaskiss, from the lower level. "Here's Rodd. Ask Geneste if he wants his mail-bag, or if it is to go on to Darra?"

Geneste and Clare went round to the back veranda, which looked down upon the yard. Jemmy Rodd had just arrived and was undoing his bundle of leather mail-bags, each sealed with the big official seal. "Good-day, Mrs. Tregaskiss!" said Rodd, interrupting what seemed to be a stormy colloquy with Tregaskiss. The master of Mount Wombo was sputtering out imprecations over a piece of news the mailman had brought him.

"By the Lord, I'll let them have it if I can get a chance!" he was shouting. "I'll insist upon the police turning out. It's a disgrace to a civilised country. What do you

think of this?" he called out to Geneste. "Those devils of strikers have cut the throats of three of my best horses, and my drays are stuck up on the other side of Ilgandah. I hear they've burned down Craig's woolshed, and are coming this way. We shall have to arm, and by the Lord, I'll give them no quarter!"

"Oh, they'll be making for the big sheep-owners first," said Rodd consolingly. "Good-day, Mrs. Tregaskiss! the little Leura Terror has got a load this time. Don't you be frightened, ma'am. They are mostly unionist shearers under Kelso, and it 'll be the turn of Brinda Plains before it's yours."

"My best dray-horses!" roared Tregaskiss. "Look here, Hansen, we will start the first thing to-morrow; and see that the fire-arms are all cleaned."

He stormed out threats for a few minutes, not sparing oaths. Geneste had gone down the steps and got his mail-bag, which he opened, taking out his letters and papers and delivering the bag again to Rodd.

"These are for the Darra hands. I needn't seal it, Rodd. Mrs. Tregaskiss, don't you want your letters? Shall I bring them up to you? I see there's an English mail in."

At the word "English mail," the new chums drew closer, and Tregaskiss cut the string of the bag, sorting out the contents in little packets. There were three or four for Clare, and these Geneste took to her and went back to the group of men. When later he returned to Mrs. Tregaskiss, she was sitting at her own corner of the veranda, reading a letter of thin foreign sheets. She looked up and asked him for particulars of the outrage. He understood that it was not from apathy she had escaped, but to avoid the sound of her husband's oaths. Tregaskiss was one of those men whom the presence of a lady would not restrain from swearing, certainly not that of his wife. There was nothing more to tell. Rodd's information was so meagre

that it was certain Jemmy the Liar was for once keeping to the strict truth, and that the non-arrival of the drays was accounted for. Blanchard came up with another letter for Mrs. Tregaskiss, which had been sorted into the wrong pack.

"Have you got yours?" asked Geneste.

"No," he answered; "they are in the Brinda bag. It doesn't matter. I don't expect anything from England."

"Oh," exclaimed Clare, looking in a puzzled manner at the one he had brought her, "this is from Gladys too! I can't make it out."

Blanchard deliberately sat down and took up a newspaper Geneste had been reading. Clare looked up with bright, excited eyes.

"Mr. Blanchard, I've got news for you. You said you knew Mrs. Hilditch. Well, before very long you'll perhaps see her. She is coming here!"

Blanchard gave an odd little gasp, and went very white. The voice in which he answered was quite mechanical.

"Coming here? How is that?"

"Mr. Hilditch is dead. He had a dreadful illness. He died,—let me see,—it must be nearly a year ago. Gladys has been ill too. She has had something wrong with her nerves, and the doctors have ordered her a voyage. She is coming out by the British India line and will stop at Port Victoria. To think of Gladys at Port Victoria!"

Mrs. Tregaskiss laughed—again with the note of girlish gladness. The thought of seeing Gladys seemed a renewal of youth. Blanchard said not a word. She went on: "I ought to have got this when she sent the photograph. She was going to sail immediately." She ran her eyes over the second letter.

"This is from Gladys too—from Colombo. She was breaking the voyage there. It's like a play when the announcement and the arrival come together. She will be

at Port Victoria by the next boat, and she wants to come up here."

Geneste remembered that he had a letter to send by Jemmy Rodd, and left the other two together. Clare looked at Mr. Blanchard, full.

"Tell me," she asked, "did you know Mrs. Hilditch very well?"

Blanchard hesitated. "I knew her," he said,—"I think I knew her pretty well."

"She never talked to you about me?"

"Oh, no! Yes, I remember her saying that she had a friend who was married, and in Australia, but she did not mention your name. Mrs. Hilditch," he added, after a moment, "was extremely—modern. She went forward, and looked forward, rather than backward. She was very much taken up with life, as it moved at the moment, round her. She always wanted to be up to date and to march with the new ideas."

"Gladys always was full of ideas."

"But she did not hold to her ideas for long at a time. She only cared for them if they meant a new sensation. I think she got into a way of looking upon life as a drama, which must be exciting, if nothing else. Contrasts were delightful to her. She was essentially a woman of luxury, but she liked playing at East-End work, and touching hands with sordid tragedy, for the sake of enjoying her ease and luxury the more when she came back to them."

There was great bitterness in his tone.

"I knew Gladys Warraker well, Mr. Blanchard," cried Clare indignantly, "and I know that you are unjust to her!"

"Ah! but you have not known Gladys Hilditch," he answered. "If you had you would understand that I am only quoting her own estimate of herself. I think," he added, "that her marriage and her immense riches must have made a great change in her. She had a trying life

with her invalid husband, and she took what distraction she could abroad."

"I never saw Mr. Hilditch. He was a wealthy shipowner, wasn't he? Tell me what he was like."

Blanchard hesitated again.

"He was like—— Oh, the type of conventional *nouveau-riche* describes him sufficiently. He was not a bad sort, but he was vulgar and a bore. He used to sit at the head of his dinner-table, wheeled in; and he talked a good deal about himself, and drew people's attention to his wife's jewels, and to the points in her painters admired."

"And now he is dead."

"Now he is dead," repeated Blanchard calmly.

"Mr. Blanchard," said Mrs. Tregaskiss boldly, "shall you be glad or sorry to see Gladys Hilditch again?"

His face worked slightly.

"It is hard to say. I shall be sorry because it will be a revival of some painful associations. I shall be glad because one is always glad, Mrs. Tregaskiss, to see a woman who has once deeply interested him. It's not possible to help it."

"*Once?*" she said.

He did not reply.

She half stretched out her hand in an impulsive movement.

"I am Gladys' friend, and I don't think when we come together that she will keep many secrets from me. If I can help you in any way, you may trust me."

"I know that. But, with regard to Mrs. Hilditch, there is nothing in which you can help me. I dare say Geneste told you something of what I mentioned to him—about my life?" he added abruptly.

"Yes; only a bald outline. He spoke of your career as a clergyman. Please let me say that I admire and honour you for your courage and honesty."

"Oh, that! Of course, there was nothing else to do. Besides, it meant liberation from a great sham."

"But it destroyed your worldly prospects."

"I suppose it did. That, however, is not important. I was sorry about some things—the working with the poor and such like. I tried being a sort of lay preacher of the humanities in the East End, but——" He stopped.

"Gladys interfered," mentally filled in Clare. "Dr. Geneste told me nothing confidential," she said aloud. "He thought you would not mind my knowing that much."

"Oh, no! I am very glad. In fact, I gave him a sort of permission—if you cared. It's very good of you to be interested in me, Mrs. Tregaskiss, and of Geneste, too. He has got a way of worming out one's secrets. I don't mean anything disparaging—quite the reverse. But something in him compels a fellow to speak out from the inside of him."

"Yes, I have felt that."

"It's his power of sympathy, I suppose, and the sense of a common bond of suffering. He has gone through a good deal himself."

"I should fancy that being a doctor has taught him to understand human nature," said Clare.

Blanchard's words had lifted a vague weight from her mind. She had been a little troubled at, and just a little ashamed of, this tendency in herself to reveal the inner things of her mind to Dr. Geneste. It seemed to indicate an attraction—something she could not think of without a faint blush; something which she would not even put into words. But if Blanchard, who was a man, felt the same, why should she mind?

"Not only that," Blanchard answered; "though I dare say it has a good deal to do with it. I believe he was thought a good deal of as a physician, Mrs. Tregaskiss. I've come across references to him, and I've read some things he has written. No, it isn't only that. I wonder if this would be a breach of confidence? I can't think so.

He invited my confidence by partly giving me his own. Geneste very nearly wrecked his life for a woman."

"Ah!"

"But he had the strength to—flee temptation. That's what an infatuation for an unworthy woman means, even if a man intends to marry her."

"You seem to half imply—— Mr. Blanchard, it is not possible that you can have the faintest notion in your mind of Gladys Hilditch!"

"God forbid! Let us leave Mrs. Hilditch out of the question, Mrs. Tregaskiss. I see you have jumped at a conclusion, not unnatural. My ridiculous upset at the sight of her photograph—and—all the rest. But I assure you that I am nothing to Mrs. Hilditch, nor she to me, beyond being, as I said, a lady in whom I was once much interested."

He got up, as if to close the conversation, but lingered, fidgetting with the newspaper.

"I thank you sincerely all the same, Mrs. Tregaskiss; and, as you say, I dare say Mrs. Hilditch will tell you anything there may be to tell." After a moment or two he added, in a different tone: "I am glad you like Geneste. I've got to know him pretty well. You see, he is a good deal at Brinda Plains. It's bad luck for him, that lame leg. Cripples him a bit, and puts a stop to his wild life. An explorer among dangerous blacks needs to be sound of wind and limb."

"Yes. Is Dr. Geneste sorry to give all that up?"

"No, I don't fancy so. He is not so young as he was. And, after all, he has done splendid service in opening up the country. I almost wonder he doesn't go back to England. He keeps touch with it by his articles. I suppose you read the one in the *Nineteenth Century?*"

"Yes," said Clare. "Perhaps," she added, "there is an attraction on the Leura for Dr. Geneste."

"You mean Miss Cusack? He's old for her, Mrs. Tre-

gaskiss ; and Geneste couldn't be in love with that girl, charming and pretty and angelic as she is, in the way that a man like him would be in love with a woman—*has* been in love with a woman. Still, that would be the salvation of the affair, don't you think, if he did marry her? He has gone through all the fiery business, and his feeling for her would be quite different—more tender and more protecting, but not love."

"You think he will marry her?" said Mrs. Tregaskiss, in a low voice.

"Yes, I often fancy so. I can't help thinking," Blanchard went on, unconsciously following out poor Helen's train of thought, "that, if Elaine hadn't pined herself to death, Lancelot would have married her in the long run, and settled down comfortably at Camelot. I had an idea, some little time ago, that they were almost, if not quite, engaged, but I've changed my opinion since he was last over. If anybody is in the running now, it looks like young Gillespie. She is a nice girl, Mrs. Tregaskiss,—just the sort of a girl a fellow would like his sister to be."

Mr. Hansen lounged up, leading Ning, his ugly face all abeam with content.

"Isn't she good, the Pickaninny? I say, Mrs. Tregaskiss, the boss sent me to tell you that he'd be glad for you to go down to the office. He's posting up the station log. I offered to write it, but he said no one but you knew what had been doing. I must say I *am* enjoying to-day," Mr. Hansen went on, in a burst of confidence as he accompanied Clare down the veranda. "The Pickaninny is splendid company; and it's awfully jolly to come to a place on Sunday and find everybody clean and camping in the veranda, you know, especially when you get a good dinner, and the mail comes in, and there are the papers to read. You see, one *is* taught a religion when one is a youngster," added Mr. Hansen apologetically, "and the least you can do

to keep it up is to camp on Sunday and wear a coat and a white shirt."

Blanchard laughed. It was a compendium of bush orthodoxy. To put on a clean shirt and to camp on Sunday is the stockman's open profession of allegiance to a Higher Being.

CHAPTER XV.

DOWN WITH FEVER.

It was a week later. Clare Tregaskiss was alone at Mount Wombo. Tregaskiss and Mr. Hansen had started off with pack-horses to bring back what they could save from the wreckage of the drays. Mr. Hansen had returned with Jo Ramm and his team of bullocks, pressed into the service, carrying most of the loading, but Tregaskiss had gone to Ilgandah, and was still absent. Times were turbulent just now on the Leura, and no doubt he wished to be where his presence was most likely to be useful—at the headquarters of the Pastoralist Committee. So his wife reasoned. He had offered a reward in hopes of discovering the perpetrators of the outrage upon his horses, and it was owing to his urgent complaints, as much as to Mr. Cusack's frenzied entreaties for police protection, that a military patrol had been told off for the district and a force of special constables enrolled. The delayed shearing was proceeding vigorously at Brinda Plains and at other of the large sheep-stations employing southern labour, and so incensed were the unionists that they threatened to burn every one of the woolsheds, and to wreck the train bearing wool bales from Cedar Hill to Port Victoria.

There was little or nothing to fear for Mount Wombo, unless it were on the score of Tregaskiss' personal unpopularity, to which, no doubt, was owing the loss he had sustained in the sticking up of his drays. Mount Wombo, Darra-Darra, and a few others were cattle-stations and employed but a few men. Tregaskiss, at any rate, appeared to take it for granted that his wife was perfectly safe with

no other protectors than Shand and the two Chinamen. Hansen had gone back to the out-station, where he was more needed, as a muster was going on, and besides there was extra work at the bore, in view of the continued drought, and even Mr. Shand was absent a whole day at a time, carrying rations thither.

Clare Tregaskiss was not nervous in the sense in which ordinary women are nervous. In fact, she rather relished the fillip to her monotonous existence. And then—oh, miserable certainty ! long since established in her mind, the absence of her husband was an untold relief. She roused herself by an effort of will from the dreamy mood into which she had lately fallen. She had got into a way of brooding restlessly upon the limitations of her lot. Geneste's words haunted her. It did seem hard that she would never know the sweetest of human joys. He had known it, or he could not have spoken with so much fervour. Had he then so loved the worthless woman upon whom he had so nearly, according to Blanchard, thrown away his life. Could she have been worthless, if he so loved her? She wondered and wondered, and, somehow, in their brief acquaintance every look, word, gesture of Geneste's seemed to stand out and acquire a new significance.

She was wise enough to know that this brooding was unhealthy, but her very preoccupation enabled her to bear more calmly the jar of Tregaskiss' companionship. Now that he was gone she could throw herself more readily into her daily tasks. She set to work upon some calico frocks for Ning, and began a campaign against 'Gusta's negligences. She had the bachelors' quarters cleansed and reorganised ; the store put tidy, and certain alterations made in the arrangement of the furniture of the house. Much of this she did with her own hands ; and it was in trying to move a heavy table that she strained her back, and then one day discovered that her

body was aching disproportionately, and that she was very cold, though the thermometer stood over 100°. When the fits of shivering were followed by severer pain, and by fever and giddiness, she knew, without being told, that she was in for a touch of Northern fever.

The second day that it racked her,—or rather the fourth from her seizure, for this fever holds its victim on alternate days,—as ill luck would have it, butchers came and Mr. Shand was compelled to take them to a distant part of the run, which involved two nights away from the head-station. He left her with uneasiness and regret, but he could do nothing except send a message to Tregaskiss by the mail-man, who was passing, and another to Jo Ramm's wife, who camped with her husband's drays some twenty miles distant, begging her to take the first opportunity of getting to Mount Wombo. Mrs. Ramm was one of the resources of the district when servants ran short or a sick nurse was wanted.

All day Clare lay aching, burning, and dizzy, with barely energy enough to take such simple remedies as suggested themselves, and helpless under the clumsy ministrations of the half-castes, 'Gusta, and Ah Sin. She remained stretched upon the sofa in the drawing-room, wrapped in her opossum cloak, though the heat was scorching outside, seeing curious visions and deluded by wandering fancies, longing, when she could think collectedly, that the hours would pass and bring her to the off-day of comparative ease.

It was four o'clock. Ning was playing with her doll by her mother's side, acting a tragedy of "debil-debil." The child's imagination, fed by the legends of the blacks' camp, had of late been exercising itself upon this mythical personage.

"*Kai!* Here, you pickaninny, you stop inside there," rehearsed Ning, putting her doll in the centre of a circle on the carpet defined by tiny heaps of twigs, which she

called her fires. She had seen Claribel light fires round the playground to keep debil-debil away. "Mummy, my make plenty fire, and suppose debil-debil look after pickaninny, he sit down along side fire and pickaninny quite safe. Cobbon old, that fellow debil-debil. Cobbon cold—like it mummy. Ba'al he got him 'possum rug. Budgery fire—my mean very good fire. No touch Ning's pickaninny."

But Ning's dramatic instinct demanded that pickaninny should be naughty and stray beyond the circle into the clutches of debil-debil, who was represented by a nigger doll, mutilated and of a forbidding aspect. Pickaninny was lost under the sofa, whither debil-debil had carried her and Ning tragically roamed the room wringing her hands like a bereft Demeter, and crooning a blacks' "ugal," which the half-caste had taught her as the accepted form of exorcism for debil-debil, or the impish Yo-wi, or any other spirit whatsoever.

"'Yurū dhàri nje ; yūri, dhàri nje.
Dûla ranja burûla ; yūri dhàri nje !'"

"Oh, Ning, child, don't make so much noise ! Mummy has a headache. Mummy is very sick."

The dogs barked outside. The thud of a horse's hoofs sounded in the yard. Had the unionists come? Clare wondered vaguely. Ning ceased her outcries as 'Gusta entered.

"Please, Mrs. Tregaskiss, it's a gentleman."

Clare roused herself and turned dazed eyes to the door, to encounter the anxious gaze of Geneste.

"You are ill !" he exclaimed ; "and there's nobody to look after you ?"

"Mummy's sick, and pickaninny belong to me is sick, and debil-debil has carried her off, and Ning has been a good girl, Dr. Geneste, and has not done anything to make mummy worse," announced Ning, upon her knees by the

sofa, diving for her lost doll, which she had flung far toward the wall.

"All right, Pickaninny, let me come near your mother and see what is the matter with her. Ah, I know what it is." He had her hand in his and his fingers upon her pulse. "You have got a touch of fever. When did it come on?"

"I don't know—I'm all aching and confused. Yes, I suppose it's fever. Is Keith with you?"

"He's at Ilgandah, harrying the Pastoralist Committee. They've been having rows there. No, the fact is, Rodd passed and left some sort of message about your being alone, and that I was to tell Tregaskiss if I saw him, and as I didn't quite like the notion of your being left with only those two Chinamen, I hurried along. Lucky I did, too. Mrs. Tregaskiss, this won't do. You must be got to bed at once."

He went out and called 'Gusta and Claribel, and among them they prepared Clare's bed, and he carried her in, leaving the two women to undress her. Afterward he routed about Tregaskiss' office and found the medicine-chest and the medicine he wanted. When he came back Clare was in bed, her eyes wild and her speech wandering. There were alternations of shivering and fever, and he saw that she was in for rather a bad bout. He gave her laudanum to induce perspiration, and by and by she got quieter. With the deftness of a nurse, he moved about getting her all that could make her more comfortable, and oddly enough, there seemed nothing strange to her in his attendance—it was as though she had been used to it long, long ago, and his very presence brought a sense of rest and soothing indescribably delightful.

Geneste was perplexed. Clearly she was not in a condition to be left to the tender mercies of the half-caste and the incompetent 'Gusta. He mentally ran his eye over the list of neighbours, but the only one near was Mrs. Car-

mody, who needed caring for even more than Clare. He thought of motherly Mrs. Cusack and sympathetic Helen, but Brinda Plains was fifty miles distant and in a state of siege, all the men on the station sleeping with fire-arms in readiness, expecting, while the free shearers were at work, an attack on the woolshed. There was not even a stockman's wife available at Darra-Darra, and he had given up the idea of procuring a nurse as hopeless, when the recollection of Mrs. Ramm, the bullock-drover's wife, camped halfway between the two stations, came to him as an inspiration. That evening, when Clare was sleeping under the influence of the opium, he saddled one of Tregaskiss' horses, put a side-saddle on the quietest of the lady's hacks, and went at full speed in search of Mrs. Ramm. It was twenty miles to Jo's camp, and good riding was needed for them to reach Mount Wombo by breakfast time.

"I have brought someone to look after you," he said to Mrs. Tregaskiss when, after having bathed and dressed, he came to pay her a professional visit.

She looked the ghost of herself, so pulled down was she and so shaken. Mrs. Ramm came in behind him and made an awkward salutation to the sick mistress. She was the roughest-looking of creatures, short, thick-set, broad-featured, her face pitted with smallpox marks, her wiry iron-gray hair cropped close, "for the convenience of it," her hands, huge, red, and apparently designed by nature for the use of a scrubbing brush. But she was scrupulously clean, and her short dark blue skirt and striped jacket were fresh from the wash.

"Mrs. Ramm!" murmured Clare, in astonishment. "Where did you come from?"

"It's the doctor himself that rode over to the camp last night and fetched me. My word, Mrs. Tregaskiss! I'd have ridden a hundred miles to see a decent woman again. It's a year and more that I've trudged along beside Ramm

and the bullock-dray, or else sat on the wool-bales, and now I'm camping by myself close agen the bore, while he does a job for the road surveyors. I just went to the men's camp to clean up. Lord, it was dirty! I aint no great shakes, and them men laughed fine at me with my house under the dray. But I says: 'Them as lives in glass houses shouldn't shy stones at them as lives in drays.' And I had the laugh of them when I saw all their muck."

Clare turned an eloquent look of gratitude on Geneste. How her face had changed, he thought; it had lost that strange masked look. Or was it only when she looked at him that it reflected her real inner self?

"You went all that way to bring her? You must have been on horseback the whole night. And you did it for me!"

"You forget I'm used to that sort of thing. I really couldn't feel happy about you, in the hands of Claribel and 'Gusta. Mrs. Ramm may not be an accomplished nurse, but she knows how to make a bed, anyhow, and can keep things a bit tidy about you."

"'Deed, sir," said Mrs. Ramm, bridling up as she paused in the act of dusting the looking-glass, "you mustn't think I'm not used to gentle folk's ways. Before I married Ramm I was servant to the Mr. Micklethwaites, as was just straight from a castle in England. And if you'd a just seen that house. Satin cushions, and, my word! a Brussels carpet, and hair-brushes with a silver letter on 'em—for all the world like yours, Mrs. Tregaskiss. Not but what you've got a nice place here, and Ramm, he do say it does his heart good to look at the gimcracks and flowers about. I allers holds on to flowers myself, and I mind well, how, thinks I, at them Micklethwaites, this droring-room do look that cheerless, with ne'er a green splurt, or a lady, and I gets a pie dish and puts water in it and picks a lot of shallot tops—there warn't nothing else—and sticks 'em in. And my word! they did look fine, and they

smelled beautiful. Them gentlemen was that pleased they laughed to split their sides when they seed 'em."

"Well, you needn't put any shallot-tops in here, Mrs. Ramm, for there are plenty of flowers in the garden. And now you shall go and see if Ah Sin hasn't got something good for Mrs. Tregaskiss' breakfast; and you shall set Ah Sin at once to kill a chicken for broth, and I trust you to bring it to my patient regularly."

"You are very good to me," said Clare softly, when they were alone. "I don't like to trouble you so."

He had been preparing a dose, and gave it to her to swallow before he replied. Then he stooped down and touched her hand. He had the physician's touch, cool and healing, a touch which has always something of a magnetic effect on the nerves.

"Let me be good to myself by allowing me to stop a day or two and try to be good to you," he said, with a tender intonation in his voice. "You need it, and there are not many to be good to you."

She did not answer. All day he came in and out, ministering to her comfort and ease, as a mother or sister might have done. When she said this to him, he laughed, and answered that it showed doctoring was his real vocation, since he took so naturally to his old trade. He put her food before her himself, arranging the tray, upon which he laid a pale pink rose, and talked to her, and, when he thought she was tired, read her to sleep. She was not in pain to-day, and there was almost blessedness in the lassitude. His companionship was pleasant, apart from personal considerations. He had seen much, had read much, and had just the touch of sentiment and mysticism without which no man can appeal absolutely to a cultivated woman.

It was long indeed since Clare had talked of the things she now spoke about to him. Her very weakness and the novelty of the situation contributed to unreserve. She

was alone ; she was helplessly dependent upon him. Her husband was away ; had not even written to tell her of his whereabouts ; did not appear to concern himself in the least whether she was well or ill, cared for or the reverse. There was not another man, except the two Chinamen and the blacks, in the camp during these two days anywhere near her. And here was Geneste, no kin, and in no way called upon to consider her well-being, who had come over because he feared all might not be well, and had ridden all through the night to secure for her the attendance of a responsible woman. She discerned in this proceeding a delicate chivalry, which appealed to her in a manner which would perhaps have been foreign to Geneste's own thoughts of the matter, and who tended her as her husband had never done—not from the mere medical point of view, which was natural enough, but with all those nameless attendances the sweetness of which lies in the manner of their doing, and with always that undercurrent of emotion of which, though she could not put it into words, she was acutely conscious.

The next day the fever had her in its grip again. It went through all its stages—shivering and racking pain in every limb, and then burning heat and headache, with strange fancies and grotesque pictures standing out in the darkness of closed eyes ; then laudanum-stupor, with only the consciousness of pain and thirst, and of Geneste standing by, putting wet cloths to her head. She was feebly delirious, though she was unaware of it, and in her babblings revealed herself to Geneste,—who purposely kept Mrs. Ramm from the room,—with the frankness of a child telling its mother of its sufferings. His heart ached with pity as he listened. What a horrible misfit this was of Fate ! he thought, as the sensitive, scourged soul laid bare its secret pains ; the agonising jar of companionship by day and by night with a nature coarse to the core ; the awakening to doom in her early married months ; the

morbid hatred at times of the children born of such a union; the physical aversion to caresses; the loathing and disgust of spirit-laden breath; the battle of conscience with all her womanly instincts, and the triumph of conscience and martyrdom of self-repression. What a lonely life it had been! How starved, how cold, how walled in, how beaten down! He longed to snatch up the fine, tender creature from the defilement of her surroundings; to bear her away to a refined, luxurious, intellectual home; to give her the moral and mental food her whole being craved; to warm her with the fire of passion; to nourish her with affection, till the poor, bruised, stunted bud should expand and open forth into the glorious flower it was meant should gladden the world. "What might she not be," he said to himself, "to a man who had her heart!"

In that hour of delirium he got to know the woman herself—and he got to know, too, that he loved her.

He was glad, very glad, that he loved Clare Tregaskiss. Fifteen years before, he had loved a woman of loose morals madly—so madly that but for the accidental discovery of her faithlessness and utter venality he would have married her. Now he loved a good woman, not so recklessly, but with an even surpassing fervour. He was glad to experience the emotion which he had believed would never now come into his life.

For fifteen years he had foresworn love in its finer acceptation. During the first six or seven of these years, adventure, danger, and the excitement of exploration had been the safety-valve for his restless energies. Women he had not needed. In fact, he had turned from all that reminded him of his life of civilisation with an intense revulsion. Then, during two years when he had lived at the northern extremity of Leichardt's Land, he had taken to himself a graceful South-Sea Island girl, for whom, till she was killed tragically by a shark while bathing, he had entertained an animal and half contemptuous affection.

Looking back upon this episode since the dawning upon him of Clare Tregaskiss, he felt a curious shame. After the girl's death he made his great expedition across the northern neck of the colony, through a barbarous country and hostile natives, from gulf to ocean, and it was then he had received the spear-wound which lamed him for life. The hurt had caused a troublesome and dangerous inflammation, and had put a stop to the wild exploration he had delighted in. During his forced inaction he had taken up, in a measure, his old scholarly and scientific pursuits, and the former man had begun gradually to replace the new one. He had even had vague thoughts of going back to England. There was no question now of lung delicacy. He was not yet beyond the prime of life, and might still have a successful career before him. The Australian career had not been, in the financial sense, a success; but he had private means, and this did not trouble him. Besides, Darra-Darra, which was not heavily encumbered like Mount Wombo, might turn out a profitable investment when times got better and successive droughts were followed by years of plenty. It was in this wavering mood, when he had half resolved to take a trip to England and look round him before making a final decision as to his future, that he met Helen Cusack. He had got into a way of riding over pretty often to Brinda Plains, which was about as far on the other side of Darra-Darra as Mount Wombo was on this one, mainly because the number of hands employed there and the prevalence, during the winter, of an influenza epidemic, had called for his professional services, which he gave gratuitously when required. Mrs. Cusack had been rather seriously ill, and during that time he had seen much of Helen. Even before the scene in the garden, it had crossed his mind as a not unpleasing possibility that he might marry her and take her with him to England. But for that sudden jerk of the bit, when he had been brought face to face with facts

and consequences, the possibility might have become a reality. It might still have become so later,—for in a reactionary impulse his mood had swayed to the girl and to the joys of domestic life,—but there had intervened the meeting with Mrs. Tregaskiss at Cedar Hill, and their strange night talk at The Grave camp, and his fate was sealed, and Helen's light was henceforth obscured.

In this case there was no reaction, nor were there any doubts. He acknowledged to himself, without hesitation, that he loved her. He told himself also that his plan of going to England must remain for some time, at any rate, unfulfilled. It would be his duty to himself and to her, as well as his joy, to stay on the Leura, and to do his best to make life more bearable to her. He had no base motives. He meant no harm. She was the last woman with whom he could associate any unworthy desire. It should be a case of beautiful platonics. He loved her. There was nothing disgraceful in that. There would be no shame for her if it were that she loved him. Something told him that she did, or if not yet, that he would not have long to wait. Why should they not love each other? Her lot was hard, her life very lonely. In the true sense of the word, she was not married at all. All that she owed was the mere material obligation. From nature and temperament her lawful possessor was quite incapable of appreciating the treasure which a caprice of destiny had allotted him. He foresaw for her even worse times than she had already undergone. The drink habit was growing upon Tregaskiss, as it is apt to do in Australia upon men who have combined it with what is called a "touch of the sun." Geneste had, from rumour and observation, made himself sure of that. This vice might be followed by other vices. Geneste knew, though he had concealed his knowledge from Clare, that the flirtation with Miss Lawford, begun during Mrs. Tregaskiss' absence in Port Victoria, was being commented on in the district, and was a source of

uneasiness to Mrs. Cusack. He knew, too, that instead of being at Ilgandah with the Pastoralist Committee, Tregaskiss was spending most of his time at the Ococks, where Miss Lawford was paying a holiday visit.

There was, Geneste gleaned, a good deal of gossip rife about the Tregaskisses. Clare was a woman to pique curiosity, and Tregaskiss' loud manner, his dash and his good-looking bloated face and fine Viking physique, attracted attention wherever he went. Geneste could understand that he might dominate a little hysterical brunette like Miss Lawford. It seemed to be only of late that he had developed a liking for the society of women of a certain rollicking type, and he did not confine his attention to Miss Lawford. There was an inn at Ilgandah, kept by an Irish widow and two daughters, where he put up, and where the young women afforded him amusement, of a harmless kind, it is true, but which gave rise to reports derogatory to the dignity of Clare Tregaskiss' husband. Though it was generally known that Tregaskiss was heavily in debt to the bank, it was known also that he spent a good deal of money on imported cattle, on wire fencing, the construction of bores, and in other less useful ways. Some people did not scruple to declare that before long he would be sold up ; others maintained that he could not keep race horses, throw his money about at the township, and talk so big, if he were not all safe. Though, to be sure, the keeping of race horses for the northern meetings is not the reckless outlay it might appear. Still, there are concomitant expenses which mount up the total. And then, the world did not realise that Tregaskiss always talked big—except to his wife. It was an article of his social philosophy so to do. He had made his way in England through talking big on occasions, and he had won Clare Gardyne by talking big about the disinterestedness of his devotion for her.

Three days passed. Shand and the butchers were still at the out-station, and Tregaskiss did not come. The fever

had its periodical term, and though this time it was less severe, Mrs. Tregaskiss was weaker. Geneste did all that was possible to keep up her strength. He killed a calf, and himself superintended Ah Sin in the making of broth and jelly. He beat up eggs with brandy, and hour by hour poured nourishment down her throat. When free from pain, except for the prostration, she was quite happy. In those three days she seemed to live a lifetime, and past and future were annihilated, and the present had the luxurious fantasy of an opium dream. As a matter of fact the laudanum which he gave her had much to do with this impression.

A day or two later he got her on to the sofa in the drawing-room, and there were long idle talks in which she learned much of him and he much of her. In detail she told him little, but the side lights which her conversation gave were vividly illuminating.

CHAPTER XVI.

"YOU OUGHT NOT TO HAVE SAID THAT."

But the interlude must come to an end. Geneste had been a week at Mount Wombo, and Clare was on the fair way to recovery. The fever attacks had become less and less, and the days of respite now only a dreamy pleasure. She spent them mostly on a hammock in the upper veranda. The passion creeper and native cucumber made a shade from the sun and threw wavering reflections upon the boards. The scent of some untimely sandal-wood blossoms floated up from the enclosure.

There had been a storm somewhere—over Lake Eungella probably, for alas it had not travelled to the plains, which were brown and bare, while the cattle were bogging in the fast-drying water-holes and dying of thrist and want of grass. But the distant storm had at least cooled the air a little, and there was a faint breeze which made mosquitoes cling to the ceilings. Clare Tregaskiss, in her china silk tea-gown, with her delicate refined face, her creamy skin, and deep brown eyes, which had yellow lights, looked herself not unlike a languorous tropical flower. She had a piece of needlework in her hand, but made very few stitches. Geneste sat beside her. He had been down to the Chinaman's garden, and was preparing a *granadilla*, while Ning stood by, the two dolls hunched under her arm, watching the operation with deep interest. The baby, lying on a mat at the other end of the veranda, was crowing up to Claribel, who made blacks' noises for its amusement, Lona, the other half-caste, and her pickaninny down below join-

ing in every now and then with a guttural "Yucke! My word, that budgery fellow!"

The sun was getting near its setting. In the storm quarter a low ridge of clouds was rising. The straight black gidia trunks cast heavy shadows, and their silvery-gray foliage had a livid look. The usual group of horses had gathered round the smoking rubbish heap, and the milkers, a scanty herd in these dry times, were being driven up to the yard. Presently there was the sound of a stock-whip cracking, and a long "Coo-ee," and then Tommy George, leading a pack-horse, appeared jogging through one of the gidia clearings. He called out something to Lona, who took up the story.

"My word, missus! mine think it massa come along directly."

Clare half rose. She had turned very pale. Her low exclamation had in it a sound of dread. Geneste did not stop his scooping of the *granadilla*. He sugared the dainty mess and put it before her.

"Keith is coming," she said.

"Yes. Lie still. I won't have you getting up to meet him. Besides, he isn't here yet. I'll go and ask Tommy George."

He went out. When he had gone Clare sank back again; and a patch of red rose in each of her cheeks. She called Ning to her and gave her the *granadilla*. "Here, child! I don't want it."

Ning took the fruit and ate it slowly, watching her mother all the while with solemn inquisitiveness. "Mummy no glad that daddy is coming back," she said.

"Oh, you cruel little wretch!" Clare cried passionately; "what makes you say such things?"

Ning stared still more. Such ebullitions in her mother were rare.

"Mine plenty glad daddy come back," she said, with stoic contentment. "What for mummy not glad?"

"Oh, go away!" cried Clare. "Go and play with Claribel. Go, all of you, and meet daddy down by the Crossing!" and Ning departed, her solemn gaze haunting her mother after she had disappeared, like an accusing ghost.

After a little while Geneste returned. "He will not be here just yet. Tommy George left him at the bore and pushed on to tell you. Well, I'm glad I shall see Tregaskiss before I leave. I was meaning to go back to Darra to-morrow."

She said not a word. When he looked at her, he saw that her chest was heaving slightly and her eyes bright with unrestrained tears.

"Clare," he said softly, putting out his hand and touching hers as it lay on the edge of the hammock, "don't fret. Things aren't worth it."

"You don't understand," she answered huskily.

"Yes, I do; utterly, better perhaps than you know. But you can't alter facts or temperaments. You cannot make a fine steel instrument do the work of a fencer's auger. All you can do is to harden yourself, and to accept life as it is. If you are disappointed at not finding sympathy where you have a right to look for it, take your right also to accept it from elsewhere. Harden yourself to the inevitable."

"Haven't I been doing that for ten years?"

"Outwardly, yes; but within there have been ravening wolves. Oh, I know it is all very well to give advice. It's like saying there is no hurt when one is racked with pain. Do you suppose my heart hasn't bled for you these days? God knows, I'd give the best part of my life if I could only make things different for you."

"Don't—don't!" she gasped hysterically. "I can't bear it. You can't imagine what it is to live always like that. It seems worse when one has been free for a little while."

"Yes, yes! Indeed I know."

"I can stand it better after it has gone on day by day,

for months. But when it comes fresh—— The smell of brandy! I hate him to kiss me. And then—he gets angry——"

She stopped and turned away her face.

"Oh, I know; it is horrible." A thought struck him. "Tell me: his temper is bad at times. Has he ever—— Is he ever violent to you?"

"Violent?"

"I mean has he ever ill-used you—struck you? That kind of thing?"

"No, not personal violence. He has been rough, but he is sorry afterward. Why do you ask?"

"I was wondering. If it were a question—— You know there are causes for which the law gives an ill-used wife her freedom."

"I know; but there could be no question of that. Don't speak of it."

They were both silent. The words they had spoken to each other marked an immense leap in their intimacy. They had before discussed Tregaskiss increasing habit of inebriety, which, month by month, week by week, had in the last two years gained a stronger hold on him.

"I have done all I can," she said. "I have begged, implored, reasoned, everything. But it doesn't seem to be of the least use, and I think my speaking of it at times makes him almost hate me. Then there is something I learned not very long ago—quite by accident; he had always kept it from me. His father died of drink. I believe that a curse of that kind is often hereditary. I wish I didn't; it makes me,"— she lowered her voice and her pained eyes glanced toward him for a moment,—"it makes me frightened for the children. I dread their coming. I prayed so that this might be a boy, and like me. Life is always harder for women. Oh," she went on passionately, "such things shouldn't be allowed! Marriage is awful,—it is wicked,—when it's a marriage like mine."

"I entirely agree with you. But you must not distress yourself about the idea of hereditary tendency. You have told me of the slight sunstroke he had. That often causes a want of self-control. I wish you could persuade him that he is not well, and get him to consult me. I might be able to do something—for the moment at any rate—to make things easier for you."

"He is so strong—he glories in his strength—it would be difficult to persuade him. It isn't fair to trouble you so," she exclaimed. "Why should you worry about me and mine?"

"Because I love you," he answered, with perfect calmness, not moving in the least toward her, or touching her hand again, only looking at her full, with a sudden lightening and glowing of his eyes.

She met the look, her own eyes deepening and held by his as though she were succumbing to some mesmeric force. It was a long gaze, and he read in it all he wanted to know. Presently she drew herself back with a slight shudder.

"You ought not to have said that. You must never say it again."

"I will not," he answered. "I will never say it till you tell me that I may. But I wanted you to know it; I wanted you to understand that there is nothing you could ask of me—nothing, which it would not be a joy and a privilege to me to do."

He got up and walked to the veranda railing without another word. There he stood for several minutes looking out upon the plain.

"I see your husband coming," he said. "I will go out and meet him and explain your illness to him, and why I am here."

His self-possession gave her confidence, and his silence appealed to her as no words could have done. Her own pulses were tingling, and her heart seemed to leap and

throb in an agony of happiness. It was so terrible, this thing which had befallen her, but it was heavenly sweet.

"Oh, I do love him!" she said, in a whisper to herself. "I do love him, with all my soul."

The revelation had come upon her with a shock, and yet with a sense of half conscious foreknowledge. It was all clear now, and she understood the power this man had exercised over her from the first. Looking back it seemed to her that she had loved him from the moment in which she had opened her eyes from her swoon in the inn at Cedar Hill, and had seen the strong lined face, with its eagle look and piercing gaze, bent over her. She knew now what had made her speak out to him about herself as she had never spoken to any other human being; understood now her vague jealousy of Helen Cusack; knew why the burden of her marriage and her motherhood had of late seemed more intolerable. It was only nature speaking, and nature's eternal and unconquerable law defying the creed of conventions. The truth flashed upon her in a moment. The quiet masterfulness of his abrupt, yet composed, declaration had given her no time for analysis, self-reproach, or indignation. He had not even asked her if she loved him. He had demanded nothing in return for his love. He had only told her of it that she might not scruple to make use of him in any way that she pleased. There was nothing to make her alarmed or angry; nothing which did not cause him to stand out in her imagination as a very knight of chivalry.

Angry with him! When he had brought and laid at her feet that which all her life she had held as almost too sacred for common earth—that which she and Gladys had so mistakenly renounced as an ideal impossible of realisation. Though she had bidden him never speak those words again, they would make music in her heart for evermore: "I love you—I love you."

She was essentially a pure woman, notwithstanding the

struggles in her of latent capacity for passion. The thought of unfaithfulness to her husband did not occur to her—unfaithfulness in the material sense; of spiritual infidelity there could be none, for the spiritual bond had never existed. As she lay back again in her hammock, bathed in the stream of beatitude which flowed over her whole being, she forgot everything but the one blessed and glorious fact that had come into her life and transfigured it. She forgot that her bondage was still upon her, that her husband would be with her in a few moments, and that his children and hers were welcoming him home.

The sun was setting; the storm-clouds had spread higher and looked lurid from the red reflection. Ning's voice sounded below, then Tregaskiss' shout: "Hallo, Pickanniny!" and with it Clare awakened to reality. She got out of the hammock, and was standing uncertainly, flushed and agitated, when her husband's heavy step sounded on the veranda stair, and presently he was beside her. Geneste had remained below.

"Well, Clare," he said, "how are you? Geneste tells me you've had a touch of fever. I don't believe there can have been much the matter. By Jove, you have got quite a colour! I never saw you looking better."

He put his big red hands on her shoulders and kissed her in a rough, perfunctory sort of way. She was oddly struck by a certain curious difference in the manner of his caress. She could not have defined wherein it lay, but was conscious of it, as a woman is intuitively conscious of any variation in the mood toward her of her life companion, whether the companionship be congenial or the reverse. The old thrill of repulsion deepened in her with the whiff of stale brandy in his breath. She was sure he had been drinking rather heavily; his handsome face was red and puffy, his eyes bloodshot, and there was more than the usual want of nicety in his dress and appearance, which confirmed the impression. His voice, too, had an indescribable thickness,

and in his manner there was suppressed irritability, mingled with something roystering, a characteristic of it accentuated now to a greater degree than was customary.

"What has Geneste been doing here all this time?" he asked sharply; and she winced under the fierce gleam of his eyes. He noticed the sign of discomposure. "It's all nonsense about his doctoring you. I don't believe in that sort of thing."

"What do you mean?" she asked resentfully.

"He could have doctored you and gone back again. Lots of people have fever and go about just the same, except when the shakes are on them. And fellows have been talking—sniggering and making remarks about his devotion to his patient. It isn't as if he was a regular doctor. The butchers started it Ilgandah way, and Cusack, with his infernal impudence, chaffed me about leaving you to be sick-nursed by a good-looking man."

"Is that why you came home?"

"I came to see how you were, and to send Geneste about his business. I don't choose him to be hanging round making love to my wife. He is not such a tremendous saint, as they could tell you further north."

She reddened, but restrained the indignant impulse to contradict him.

"It's beastly cheek!" Tregaskiss went on. "I was very much annoyed at his way of speaking to me just now. Seemed to imply that I had been to blame. Does he suppose I am going to stand still and have my property destroyed without stirring a hand to prevent it?"

Tregaskiss fumed on. In a calmer mood it might have been evident to her that his dissatisfaction had its rise partly in jealousy, partly in self-reproach. She stood still silent, a rush of conflicting emotions torturing her. She was inwardly shame-stricken, indignant, choked with a passionate aversion for her husband, all the keener because the accusation had not been unfounded, and she was unable

to stand forth and contemptuously repudiate it. For it was true that Geneste had told her he loved her. But that "he had made love to her"! No; that he had not done, would never do. She felt outraged; her holy of holies had been desecrated. An abominable construction had been put upon what to her was sacred. This, in other and minor matters, had always been the case when her finest self had come into contact with Tregaskiss' coarser personality. Now the feeling gained a new acuteness from the sanctity of the emotion upon which he was trampling.

She said, at last, in a studiously quiet voice:

"If you want to know whether I have been ill or not, you have only to ask Mrs. Ramm. Dr. Geneste rode all the way and back to their camp one night to fetch her. It is his care which has probably saved me from a bad time. You will remember that when he came over I was alone, except for the Chinamen and Claribel and 'Gusta. Not even Mr. Shand was here. That was why he stayed. As to—the other part, I have nothing to say. I think you must have exaggerated Mr. Cusack's chaff, which could not have been meant as you put it. I believe Dr. Geneste means to go back to Darra to-morrow. Please, Keith, for your own sake as well as mine, do not be rude to him, for he has done us both a great kindness, and I am sure you would be sorry afterward if you offended him."

She walked past Tregaskiss into her own room, without waiting for him to reply. Then she became terrified lest he should follow her, but he did not come. Something down below attracted his attention, and he yelled out a reprimand to one of the black boys, and presently went noisily down the stairs. By and by she heard him in the back veranda asking Geneste quite good humoredly to come in and have a nip before dinner. His anger had been only bluster, and she need not have alarmed herself; Tregaskiss, like most bullies, was a moral coward.

Ning came in fresh from her bath to have her white

frock and red sash fastened. She exhibited a new doll which daddy had brought her from Ilgandah, and which, she told her mother, Miss Lawford had dressed for her. The last piece of information gave Clare a clue as to Tregaskiss' delayed return, and she understood that he had been finding an excuse for himself by blaming her. She felt too contemptuous to be greatly annoyed. From Tregaskiss' own report to her of earlier conversations with the little governess, she knew that Miss Lawford permitted a freedom of flirtation which appealed to her husband's temperament and desire for variety. It had never occurred to her that Miss Lawford's influence could prove dangerous to her own. She dressed for dinner, holding back the hysterical sobs which rose in her throat, and mentally flying from the vague terror with which the situation impressed her. And yet, all through her dressing, she was pervaded by the thought that Geneste's eyes would meet hers for the first time since he had told that he loved her, and that for the first time, too, in her life, she must play a part abhorrent to her nature, that of a wife with a secret love for another man to conceal.

Geneste pitied her intensely when she appeared and took her place before the tea tray. He saw how pale she was, and with what an effort she kept her composure. He avoided looking at her or addressing her too directly, but vigorously sustained conversation with Tregaskiss and Shand, asking about the late sale to the butchers, particulars of the strike, the doings of the Pastoralist Committee, and the arrival of the "special" from Port Victoria. There appeared to be a good deal of talk and preparation on both sides, with little to show for it in the way of cause or result. The strikers were reported to have collected in a body for the destruction of various stations, and for summary vengeance upon the free labourers ; but as yet, beyond trying to fire two woolsheds, and the slaughter of Tregaskiss' horses, they had done no definite mischief.

"They are afraid to tackle Brinda Plains just yet," said Tregaskiss, "for old Cusack is in such a blue funk that he has a force of police round the place, and makes all his men sleep on the veranda, ready with their fire-arms. You should hear Miss Lawford's account; it's rich, I can tell you!"

"Miss Lawford is staying with the Ococks, I hear," said Geneste.

"Oh, I see you know all the Brinda Plains gossip," cried Tregaskiss boisterously. "The fair Helen, I suppose, keeps you well posted. By Jove! you know, she'll be thinking herself neglected for Mrs. Tregaskiss, if you don't take care."

Clare's face was stony, and Geneste took no notice of the insinuation, but pointedly turned the conversation to general topics. Tregaskiss' congeniality had a touch of the malignant. Geneste also noticed the change in his manner, and attributed it to the deepening effect of Miss Lawford's society. Tregaskiss was one of those men who cannot, under any circumstances, resist talking of the women they admire. He repeated more than one of Miss Lawford's sallies, proclaiming that she was splendid company, and that the land commissioner was tremendously gone upon her, but hadn't the ghost of a chance, for Hetty Lawford liked a man who was a man and had some "go" in him; she wasn't one of your die-away women, always giving themselves airs of superiority.

There was a certain aggressiveness in his tone, and as he spoke, he glanced at his wife. It was the "two can play at that game" air of a school boy, who hits first to prevent himself from being taken vengeance upon. Tregaskiss' methods were all of the elementary kind.

They sat out in the veranda afterward, but Clare gave herself no opportunity for a word apart with Geneste, nor did he appear to seek any. The baby cried, and she went to her room and sat with it on her lap conscientiously hush-

ing it, and guarding it from the mosquitoes, till it slept again ; all the time with bitterness and revolt in her heart, and yet a remorseful tenderness for the small helpless thing which was bone of her bone, and which she could not cast from her, living symbol though it was of a bondage she loathed. When she went back, the night had grown still and muggy, the clouds had blackened, and there were flashes of sheet lightning gleaming at intervals in the west.

"It means nothing," Geneste was saying, as she approached. "These storms which don't come off are a bad sign."

"We shall have to begin watering the cattle if it goes on," said Tregaskiss, "and that means extra hands and no end of expense and worry."

"They're dying fast out Brigalow camp way," put in Shand. "Another drought like last year will ruin the district."

"And the squatters too," growled Tregaskiss.

"Well, anyhow," said Geneste, "you are luckier than I am, Tregaskiss, for you have got one bore at least, to fall back upon."

How could he talk so quietly, when for her the very air was full of stress and thrill, and when her heart was breaking under the strain of the position ? And yet she admired him for his calmness, which must come, she assured herself, from the very loftiness of his motive. He meant only her good, and desired nothing but the right to help her as unselfishly as he could. Surely she herself must be a creature of evil thoughts and wishes to be so weighed down and tossed and tormented.

"Mrs. Tregaskiss," Geneste said, turning to her, "you should remember you are only an invalid yet, and ought not to sit up late. I shall have to say good-bye when I bid you good-night, for I am starting home very early to-morrow morning."

"Good-night, then, and good-bye," she said, holding out her hand.

He took it, and all that night, his touch seemed to linger with her like a living thing.

"Good-night! I am very much obliged to you for having had me for so long, and I shall leave feeling a good deal more comfortable about you than when I came. I think you are pretty safe now from bad days."

Clare answered with a commonplace. He had been very kind. She hoped that he would not find station work had been neglected during his absence.

"Oh, no! I've got a very good stockman. Tregaskiss, you won't forget that you are to bring Mrs. Tregaskiss over the first opportunity to see my diggings. It would be capital if we could manage the expedition to Eungella at the same time."

Tregaskiss agreed. He didn't see why they shouldn't do it before the worst heat had come on, and they might get Helen Cusack and Miss Lawford to join, as well as Gillespie and Blanchard and the lot of them.

"Can I get you a lamp or candle or anything?" Geneste asked formally, as Clare was turning to her part of the house.

"No, thank you, I have a lamp in my room," she answered, and so they parted.

The night was ghastly, the storm ending in wind and dust, with low grumblings of distant thunder and faint flashes of lightning. Clare lay awake, every nerve strained, waiting for her husband's entrance. When he came she pretended to be asleep, but she heard him heavily fumbling with his clothes and boots as he undressed, and stealthily crept to the very edge of the bed, holding herself quite still till he should be asleep, so that she might get up and go out to the hammock in the veranda. She did this many nights.

CHAPTER XVII.

FAIR INES.

"WHAT am I to do about Gladys Hilditch?" Clare said one day to her husband.

"Let her find her own way up from Port Victoria," he answered crossly. "She is rich and can afford to pay for a buggy and pair of horses."

"Keith, wouldn't it be possible for you to go and fetch her?"

"Not if I know it. I've got neither time nor animals. You seem to forget that we are ordered to keep ten horses in the paddock in case of the specials wanting them, and that every squatter must have a horse and man in readiness to give an alarm if necessary. Mrs. Hilditch can wait till the strike is over."

"I can't believe in the strike, or get up any proper sense of our danger," said Clare, with a laugh that annoyed Tregaskiss. "The unionists are only trying to frighten the squatters. They say Mr. Cusack is nearly over his shearing and is getting his wool loaded, and nothing has happened."

"You wait and see," oracularly replied Tregaskiss. "Other people in the district don't take things so easily."

"Well, at any rate, here's Mr. Chance who hasn't taken the trouble to get in his ten horses or to ask the specials to look after his station," said Clare, turning to Cyrus Chance, who, during one of his periodic stoppages on his way to Port Victoria, was present in the veranda while the colloquy took place.

"I'm no one to get scared at a screech, Mistress Tregaskiss," said old Cyrus, smiling grimly. "The strikers know

that, and they know too that if they burned down my woolshed I'd buy up every lawyer in Leichardt's Land to have the law on them, just as I mean to do to get off my black boy Andy."

"Andy!" repeated Tregaskiss. "Murdered one of his tribe, didn't he? I hear the police caught him up Brinda way and chained him to a tree in the paddock, but he got loose, and they said some white man must have undone his hand-cuffs."

"Ay," returned Chance, "it's true there was a white man camped close by Brinda Creek that night, and he did undo Andy's handcuffs. I'm a hard man, Mistress Tregaskiss, and a gripper on the whites as they say up here, but I've never held with hunting down the blacks and making laws for them when they've got their own tribe laws to do the work. Andy killed the other black because he had taken away his gin, and that's his affair, say I, and not Queen Victoria's."

Tregaskiss laughed. "You've got a nipping way of putting things, Chance."

"It's likely that I have, Mr. Tregaskiss,"—Chance studiously made use of the prefix,—"but I've studied the subject of colonisation, and I've no opeenion of Britishers when they get the upper hand of savages. As far as that goes, I may be a gripper right enough, and my heirs will be the better for it, but I never wronged white nor black, and I've made up my mind to get Andy off if I pay for it with all my Leura property. I don't like folks that go after other men's wives, no more than I like folks, having wives of their own, who go sweethearting other young women—of a sort."

The contempt of Mr. Chance's "of a sort" pointed the allusion. Tregaskiss reddened angrily.

"It's pretty safe on the Leura, where you haven't got to put your theories into practise, for a fellow to maintain, like that speechifying chap at Ilgandah, that the squatters

have taken the blacks' country, and are bound to kill a bullock for them every now and then. I'd like to see you killing the bullock, Chance. And that reminds me—we're very much obliged to you for your present to my wife the other day : six bottles of porter. By Jove, that was a magnificent shell out for you, Chance—quite the millionaire touch, eh ! But I think I can afford to buy her her drinks."

"I'm glad to hear it, Mr. Tregaskiss," said Chance, his small whitey-brown face turning pale with suppressed anger. "I'm glad to know you are in such a flourishing condition. There are reports going—perhaps you may have heard them—about the bank being ready to come down on Wombo, and I'm pleased for your wife's sake to know that there is no truth in them. I think I'll say good-day now, Mistress Tregaskiss. Good-day to you, Mr. Tregaskiss ! I'll not trespass upon your hospitality by sitting in your veranda any longer."

"Don't hurry," said Tregaskiss sulkily. "I'm off, and since you won't be neighbourly, and take anything——"

"No, I thank you, Mr. Tregaskiss. I've got my damper and junk at the camp, but if you've got a bit of green hide rope to spare, I'll be pleased to buy it from you for a halter for one of my pack-horses—at the market price, Mr. Tregaskiss,—at the market price."

"Your price is always a goodish bit below the market one, Chance, and I could afford to let you have that for nothing. But since you're so beastly proud, you can pay what you please. You'll find me out by the meat store when you are ready." And he went off.

"Your husband seems to be more prosperous than folks on the Leura give him credit for, Mistress Tregaskiss," said the old man, eyeing her keenly. "It surprises me, for money isn't like a boomerang ; it doesn't come back after you've thrown it away, and times are bad."

Clare looked uncomfortable.

"Please don't mind what Keith says, Mr. Chance, or take him too literally."

"No, I don't; no, I don't do that!" said Chance, with a chuckle. "If I had, he'd have done me in the eye before now. He don't like me, nor I him."

"Well, at any rate, Mr. Chance, you and I will always be good friends."

"Yes, that we'll be. And mind you what I said to you last time I was here. Nurse your babies, and turn 'em into blessings, and remember this: I've formed my own opeenions, and I keep my mouth shut on 'em. You needn't be afraid to tell me if you're in a bit of a tight place—I wasn't thinking in the way of money," he added cautiously.

"No, I know you weren't; and I shall remember. I'm rather in trouble now. My friend, Gladys Hilditch, is at Port Victoria, and you heard what Keith said; and I am wondering if you could help me any way to get her up here. Perhaps Mr. Cusack, or Mr. Carmody, or somebody from one of the stations may be down, and would bring her part of the way, anyhow. I can't tell you how obliged I'd be if you would see and ask them for me."

"Gladys Hilditch, Gladys Hilditch," repeated Chance slowly, with his queer intonation dwelling on her name. "That's the one I called Fair Ines, isn't it? She that comes from the West,

"'To dazzle when the sun's gone down,'

eh? I know, I know. Well, I'm not much in the way of womenkind, Mistress Tregaskiss. I hate the lot of them, and I never knew a lady, so to speak, till I came across you. I've sometimes thought I may have missed something, but it's too late now. Fair Ines! I'll see if I can do anything for ye, Mistress Tregaskiss, but I won't promise to go nigh the creature myself."

He departed with this doubtful promise, upon which, nevertheless, Clare placed some reliance. Sure enough, a

little while later two riders might have been seen, one afternoon at sunset, approaching through the gidia clearing, followed by a pair of black boys driving several packhorses ; and one of the riders was a lady quite unlike any of the Leura ladies, and the other Cyrus Chance.

Lona, the black gin, who was scout to the establishment, ran up to tell the news. "Mine think it that cobbon budgery White Mary," was Lona's announcement. "Altogether lady, that fellow. No jump-up fellow, like it some Leura lady!" which showed that Lona was a person of discrimination.

It was Gladys Hilditch, Gladys looking like a queen in exile, or a Burne Jones picture of a medieval lady on horseback, minus the feathers, but for the absence of those Mrs. Hilditch amply atoned by a cunning arrangement of gauze upon her picturesque broad-brimmed hat. Gladys was nothing, if not picturesque ; and she had always had the knack of wearing original, becoming, and suitable garments, sufficiently different from those of anybody else to give her distinction and mark her individuality. Any other English woman would have appeared in ordinary English riding dress, but Glady's gray habit, her coat, which was a suggestion from the Louis Quinze period, her fine batiste shirt, frilled with Point de Paris, and curved, cavalier hat were a sort of incarnation of all South Kensington and Tite Street culture dropped suddenly into Leura barbarism. She was a very beautiful woman—more beautiful now than in the old days, for during her married life, when she had had money in plenty and little else to distract her, in the early part of it at any rate, she had brought the art of dressing herself to perfection. Her face was Greek in type, only less statuesque, and with the curving back lips and slightly hollowed eye orbits, which belong rather to the days of chivalry. She did not look in the least dusty or dishevelled, though she had ridden all day over the scorching plains ; her reddish yellow fringe

was parted upon her forehead, and crinkled as evenly as though it had just been arranged by a skilful hairdresser. Her delicate skin, smooth as the leaf of a flower, was not burned or roughened ; her eyes, deep violet, limpid, and large, were undimmed by fatigue ; her thin gray habit was immaculate, her batiste unruffled, and the little *et ceteras* of her toilette—her double eye-glass with its long handle of dull silver, her gray gauntlet gloves, her jewelled riding-whip, the silver clasp of her coat, all truly seemed in keeping with the suggestion of a Fair Ines come to dazzle a more primitive race.

Seeing Clare hurrying from the upper veranda, she jumped down from her horse, not waiting for anyone to help her, pulled off her gauntlets, rubbed her rose-petal cheeks lightly with a filmy handkerchief that exhaled a suggestion only of some rare and particularly refined perfume, and was in the arms of her friend.

"Dearest Clare!"

"Oh, Gladys!"

"How thin you've grown, Clare!"

"And you—how young you look, Gladys! and not in the least ill!"

"Oh, I am quite well now, and, dear, remember, I was two years younger than you. I'm only just thirty, and I've kept myself in cotton-wool."

"And you are thinking I have not done so. Am I so terribly changed, Gladys?"

Gladys stood away and took a long gaze before she replied: "Yes—no. Yes, of course, you Sphinx! You've got a look more—more—— Never mind, I'll explain when I've made it out. You are handsomer than you used to be, if that's what you want to know, though you are so thin ; but it suits you. You look like—like Sarah Bernhardt—subtle and suggestive. Subtlety is what we are all trying for in these days," Gladys went on, in her soft sweet monologue, "so you should be satisfied. As for me, I'm sick of it.

I've been done to death with modernity and all the rest. I've rushed out here to be rid of it, but if you are going to come Ibsen's heroines over me, I give up. I was feeling quite enchanted with it all—the gum trees, and the niggers, and this sort of thing." She gave a comprehensive wave of her hand. "It's a mixture of Miss Wilkins' New England stories and the 'Roman d'un Spahi.' I've been asking that delightful specimen of an Australian man how it's managed. He's a bit of Miss Wilkins himself—only better."

She indicated with a little nod of her head Cyrus Chance, who was standing by the pack-horse he had been leading, watching her with an odd smile on his grotesque face. He looked more odd and fusty than ever, and his slight deformity more noticeable.

"Mr. Chance," said Mrs. Tregaskiss, waking to the fact of his existence, "how am I to thank you? This is a great surprise. I never dreamed that you would bring my friend to me yourself."

"Oh, he wouldn't have done it if I hadn't insisted," exclaimed Gladys, "and he wouldn't have consented then, but that I threatened to unpack my Rosalind costume—I played heroine in one of the pastoral plays, dear, modelled after Ada Rehan—and ride after him with the cowboys, or stockmen, or whatever you call them. He said that wouldn't be becoming in an English lady. I told him that Mary Stuart had done it before me, and that she was a good precedent. But he doesn't approve of Mary Stuart; she wasn't domestic enough to please him. He declares she murdered Bothwell: we had quite an argument over the Casket Letters. To think of his having gone into the Casket Letters business! Then I quoted the Empress Theodora; but he was horrified at my having read Gibbon. Fancy his knowing Gibbon! He says he educated himself on Bohn's Library and cheap literature. He is a perfect type. And he hates women. I never in all my life came

across a misogynist before. I am determined that he shall not hate me, for I like him immensely; and so I am going to reform him, and I shall let him try and reform me. I settled it for him on the way along. He wouldn't talk to me at first—wanted me to ride behind, between him and the black boys; but I said that if he was going to be disagreeable I should get down and unpack my Rosalind dress and put it on, and that finished the argument."

Gladys poured forth her rapid monologue in the sweetest, softest of voices, with a touch of disdainful languor in her tone which relieved her sprightly utterances of any trace of flippancy. Perhaps one of her charms lay in the contrast between her modern and somewhat redundant talk and the angelic dignity of her face and movements. Nothing about her went fast except her tongue, and nevertheless Clare knew she would have long fits of taciturnity when, as she declared, her mind was kneading an idea.

"Oh, Gladys!" said Mrs. Tregaskiss; "you have not changed a bit."

"Dear, yes, I have. Just wait till you get to know. I've been through the mill, and I've come out of it a good deal scratched, but so hardened and brightened up that you don't see the scratches for a while. I dare say I seem frivolous at present. But this is all so enchantingly new and crude. I've enjoyed myself ever since I left conventionality, in the shape of my maid Parker, behind at Cedar Hill, sitting on my dress-basket with cotton-wool in her ears to keep out the swearing of the bullock-drivers. If you had seen her face when they brought in the saddle-bags and I told her to pack my clothes in them! Parker is going to be a trial, I am certain. I told her to find her own way to Port Victoria, and back to England, if she liked, for she is far too grand for her surroundings. Mother and Cassandra would have had a fit at Cedar Hill. The mosquito curtains and the wall-papers would have finished

them. They never get beyond the æsthetics, and have no notion of dramatic contrast. Now, I was always dramatic—even when I married Mr. Hilditch."

Cassandra was the eldest Miss Warraker, who told fortunes by the stars, and was generally romantic and superior.

They were in the drawing-room now, and Clare was taking off Gladys' hat and veil and giving her tea, while Ning stared with big solemn eyes at the visitor.

"You are a queer little angel," said Gladys, catching the child up and kissing her; "I wish I had one like you."

She gave a sigh, and her astonishingly young face seemed for a moment to grow as old as its years. Clare had heard that the one child of Gladys' marriage had died as a baby, and pressed her friend's hand sympathetically, saying nothing. Mr. Chance's shuffling footstep sounded on the veranda, and presently he came in, carrying two great bulging saddle-bags, with the French heel of one kid shoe and the buckled toe of another peeping out at the aperture beneath the flap. He deposited these on the floor, and stood looking at Mrs. Hilditch with a sort of saturnine tenderness. Fair Ines had come and conquered, and old Cyrus had found the embodiment of his romantic dreams in this dainty creature from a world that he knew not.

"I'm thinking," he said, "that I'd better be getting down to my camp."

"Oh, Mr. Chance!" cried Clare, "don't go yet. Have some of my tea, and besides I haven't half thanked you for bringing my friend. I don't think I'll try; you can see what a pleasure you have given me."

The muscles about old Cyrus' mouth relaxed into an expression of benevolence. "Didn't I tell you," he answered, "that ye might apply to me in a difficulty,—short of a money one,—and I'd see what I could do for you?"

"I don't think much of you if you wouldn't help in a money difficulty," said Gladys.

"It's an ill business to beg, to borrow, or to lend," said old Cyrus sententiously.

"Oh, he's a miser, isn't he?" said Gladys boldly. "That's what they told me at Cedar Hill. And he's enormously rich, and could buy us all out and have a decent competence over. Isn't that so?"

"To buy *us* out wouldn't be saying a great deal," answered Mrs. Tregaskiss. "To buy you out would be a different matter."

"My husband left me five thousand a year," said Mrs. Hilditch gravely; "and if I marry again I lose every penny of it."

"Then take the advice of old man Chance, leddy, and keep your liberty and your siller. True enough, I'm a miser and a woman-hater, but I'd have been worse than that if I had given a woman the right to put her hand in my pocket, for I'd have been a beggar. No, I thank you, Mistress Tregaskiss,"—refusing Clare's proffered cup of tea,—"I'll be having it at the camp presently. Is the master on the place?"

"He went out on the run with Mr. Shand," she answered, "but he ought to be coming back now. I think I hear the dogs barking."

"Then I'll be saying good-night," said Cyrus.

Gladys turned a puzzled look upon him.

"Mr. Tregaskiss isn't a *woman!*" she cried. "Why do you want to run away from him? What does he mean by his camp, Clare? Does he prefer camping to sleeping in a house, or am I turning him out here?"

"Old man Cyrus Chance prefers to sleep and eat at his own expense," put in Chance. "I'm not saying that I don't take a meal off a neighbour's corncobs, or a pumpkin that would rot for want of gathering, but that's not a question of hospitality. Good-night, leddy! The rest of your pack is in the back veranda, and I hope you'll not find any of your gewgaws missing."

"Listen!" said Gladys. "When he knows that half of them are completely ruined, and that Parker would die at the sight of my crumpled tea-gowns. Two pairs of my best silk stockings are ornamenting the gum trees, and the Valenciennes frills of my petticoats torn to shreds and strewing the plain. The pack-horse put down his head and kicked up his legs and then bolted. Away went the pack, and the black boys gathered up the fragments."

"Silk gowns and fripperies and fallals, the like of which was never seen on the Leura!" said Mr. Chance. "You are a deal too fine for these parts, leddy. But I would not have it altered. You're good to look at, and not to be confounded with the ordinary; and your finery is just a part of yourself."

"Hear him! I'm converting him already. Mr. Chance, have you forgotten that I'm a woman?"

"Eh, but you and mistress there are a different brand from these other creatures of women, and not to be drafted into the same yard. I don't count ye as women."

"That's the prettiest compliment I've ever had paid me," returned Gladys, and she held out her hand to him with such royal grace that old Cyrus was obliged to take it and perform a very awkward bow in doing so over her outstretched fingers.

"Where's your camp going to be, Mr. Chance?" she asked.

"Agen the water-hole; close by the blacks'. They're good company for me. I've got Andy off, mistress; it cost me a pretty penny."

"Well, I shall come down after dinner—or tea,—I observe that all meals are tea here,—and we'll have another game of knucklebones," said Gladys.

"Knucklebones!" repeated Mrs. Tregaskiss.

"It's his favourite dissipation; haven't you discovered that? He has got the loveliest set. I've always longed to play knucklebones; and last night when we were camping

out, he taught me. I had some trouble to persuade him that it was not derogatory to my dignity as a woman."

"A woman!" grunted Cyrus, with an accent of contempt. "Haven't I said I did not count you? They don't know your brand up here."

"A goddess, then—without the pedestal. I have no objection, Mr. Chance, to being a goddess since you decline to play knucklebones with ordinary mortals."

"Well, anyhow," said Cyrus, "it's an innocent pastime, and takes skill; and it's cheap."

"And classic," added Gladys. "The Pompeians played knucklebones, Mr. Chance. I've seen the sets—beauties, nearly eighteen hundred years old—in the museum at Naples. You may disapprove of Mary Stuart and the Empress Theodora, and Gibbon, and the rest of your cheap literature people, but you can't trample on the Pompeians—poor petrified corpses; they're too pathetic."

The sounds of arrival became pronounced. Clare Tregaskiss' still smile might have been carved in marble.

"This is Keith," she said.

"Keith!" repeated Gladys. "Oh, I forgot! Your husband's name. I like it. I'm longing to see him. It wasn't kind of you, Clare, to meet, marry, and go off with him that year I was in Switzerland. I've often pictured to myself the kind of man for whom you gave up all the joys of civilisation: tall and stately, brave, simple, tender—intellectual of course; scorning the falsehoods and insincerity of society that you used to hold forth against; a sort of nature's king; a strong man, carving his course, like a river, and making everybody in this wild, queer country, white and black, respect and admire him. Yes, I knew what he would be like. And now I see that I was quite right."

At her last words, old Cyrus, who had edged toward the front veranda, realising that an exit by the back would bring him face to face with Tregaskiss, paused and stood

still, an expression of grim astonishment on his features. Gladys was peering out at the French window, looking upon the yard and was taking stock of the newcomer. Chance and Clare both moved near her, and glanced over her shoulders at the figure of a tall man standing by his horse and unstrapping his valise. Chance gave a queer little ejaculation, and Claire's lips tightened, but she said nothing and turned away. It was Geneste. In a moment he was at the door, confronting Gladys. She held out her hand, her beautiful face beaming, and in her manner a mixture of the sweetest dignity and friendliness.

"I don't need any introduction to Claire's husband. I can quite understand her not regretting the English life. I hope you will welcome her old friend for her sake."

"Gladys," Clare interposed, "I ought to have told you. This is not my husband; it is our neighbour, Dr. Geneste." She went forward with outstretched hand. "How do you do? We were expecting Keith. Let me introduce you to Mrs. Hilditch."

Geneste made his greetings becomingly, and Gladys laughed at her mistake. But there was an awed, almost terrified, look in her eyes. Clare's composure had been admirable, but Gladys' perceptions were keen.

When Tregaskiss arrived half an hour later, Mrs. Hilditch was in her room unpacking the saddle-bags and otherwise preparing herself for dinner. Clare was with her, and their first intimation of the master's coming was not altogether an agreeable one. Tregaskiss was in an ill-humour; he had had a longer ride than either Mr. Shand or his wife guessed, and not after stock. He had seen on the way home his cattle dying, bogged in the fast emptying waterholes; he had a stormy encounter with the drover of some travelling stock, and he had discovered that a good deal of grass had been destroyed by a bush fire. Tommy George, who came out to take his horse, was suspected of being the cause of this last disaster, through having carelessly thrown

away a burning match when lighting his pipe on the run. Tregaskiss attacked him, swore at him freely, ordered him to hand over his pipe, which he broke into fragments and threw at him, and gave Shand instructions that not another fig of tobacco was to be served to the black boys for a month to come. He fumed on in loud, wrathful accents. His horse had a sore back, and Shand came in for a share of blame for not having seen to the stuffing of the saddle. One of the stockmen was waiting for rations. "Oh, confound you!" said Tregaskiss, "I'm dog tired, and I'm not going to give out rations at this hour. You can stop till Mr. Shand has turned out the horses. Go after him to the yard and tell him. Or, here, Mrs. Tregaskiss will give them out. Clare! 'Gusta, go and ask your mistress to come out to the store."

Clare did not wait for the summons. She turned from her occupation of hanging up some of Gladys' dresses in the cretonne curtained wardrobe.

"I will come back presently, Gladys," she said.

"Yes. Stay, oh, Clare! was that—Mr. Tregaskiss?"

"That was my husband," said Mrs. Tregaskiss stonily. "You will find him perhaps a little different from what you expected—and from what he used to be—if Cassandra, who met him in England ever described him to you, but you must remember we lead a rough life, and he has been riding after cattle all day; and—and times are bad, and it is not surprising that he should be tired and a little irritable. Our cattle are dying for want of grass and water, and when you have been here a little while you will know what ruin a bush fire may cause."

Gladys said nothing. When Clare had gone she sat down on the edge of the bed and stared round her—at the little veranda room with its primitive shutters, its walls papered with pictures from the *Illustrated* and *Graphic;* its home-made furniture and sunken earthen floor covered with rugs and matting; the rough washstand and dressing-

table on which Gladys' silver-backed brushes and array of toilet implements looked so incongruous; the canvas ceiling and the velvety patch of mosquitoes in one corner waiting for darkness to leave their shelter. Gladys shuddered.

"It wouldn't matter a bit if it weren't for *him*," she murmured. "Oh, my poor Clare; my poor, dear, dear Clare! Oh, what made you do it? And you love the other man! Oh, is no one happy, no one in the whole world? Must one always love the wrong man?"

When Clare came back, which was not for a long time, Mrs. Hilditch was dressed, her beautiful hair rippling over her low forehead, and coiled behind, with a medieval-looking band of amethysts, set in antique silver, binding her head, and a like belt girding her loose muslin and Valenciennes lace robe. There was not much sign of widowhood about her, and she seemed to think it necessary to apologise for the fact.

"He has been dead fourteen months, dear, and I couldn't ever wear a cap. Oh, Clare!" she added, coming close to her friend and laying a hand on Clare's arm while she gazed at her with earnest eyes, "it is so terrible—so *hideous* to be glad! But I tried to do my duty at the last—when he got ill. They said he couldn't have lived nearly so long if it hadn't been for me."

"I know that. A man told me you were very good to him."

Gladys withdrew her arm and went back to the glass and adjusted a loose lock of her hair before she answered. Clare had been wondering how she should broach the news of Blanchard's presence on the Leura. She now saw that it was no news to Gladys, and that chance had nothing to do with their proximity to each other.

"I know who that was," Gladys answered, with studied quietness. "There's only one man on the Leura who could know anything about me and my husband. It was Ambrose Blanchard."

"I did not know his name was Ambrose," said Clare; "it was Mr. Blanchard who recognised your photograph and told me he had known you. He said that he had admired you for your goodness to—your husband."

"I am glad," said Gladys, "that at any rate he did me that justice. Come, Clare, I like this little room immensely, dear, it puts me in mind of my cabin on board the *Nana Sahib*, only that it is a great deal larger and more comfortable. But I think the veranda would be a cooler place to sit in."

CHAPTER XVIII.

CLARE'S VOW.

Tregaskiss, when he found out who his unseen auditress had been,—Glady's informed him of the fact with perfect frankness, accepting his ill-temper as a matter of course, and asking him various sympathetic questions as to the working of the station, and the probable results of the fire,—did his best to remove the impression his rough language might have made.

"A fellow is bound to swear at these niggers and bullock-drivers, Mrs. Hilditch," he remarked confidentially; "and I'm delighted to see that you're not horrified at our bush ways. It took me a long time to break Clare in,"—he laughed his fatuous laugh,—"but now I've got her in excellent order, though she is still a little inclined to give herself airs—doesn't take the cheerful view of things that you seem to do." Gladys had been giving a sprightly account of her experiences among the bullock-drivers at Cedar Hill and her night's camping out. "I must say I admire a woman of spirit. Rum old stick, Cyrus Chance, isn't he? You must have played up to him in a remarkable way to get him to bring you along—or he may have done it out of affection to my wife. He's very fond of Clare—makes her presents occasionally."

And Tregaskiss told the story of the six bottles of porter, and Gladys began to understand Cyrus Chance's objection to breaking bread in his house. She began to understand, too, Clare's far-away smile. "That's the explanation of her Sphinx look," she said to herself. "Oh, my poor dear, dear Clare! Could he ever have been handsome

and frank and attractive, as Cassandra described him? Perhaps in those days he hadn't taken to drinking whiskey, and grown red and coarse; and perhaps he was too much in awe of Clare, when she was Miss Gardyne and went to London parties, to swear before her.

Gladys had already gauged the situation, and Tregaskiss' character as well. She knew that a woman who had five thousand a year—as long as she did not marry again—must command his respect. He would, as far as his natural tendency to the superior domination of whiskey permitted, abstain from rough and ready language in her presence. Then her beauty and air of fashion awed him. Tregaskiss admired her immensely, though, as he confided to Shand and Geneste later, she was not altogether his style—put him too much in mind of ragged painters and the floppy, artistic set. Tregaskiss always talked of London life as though he were intimately acquainted with all its social intricacies. He had on his manner of boisterous good humour this evening, rapidly assumed for Gladys' benefit, and chaffed Geneste about Helen Cusack, detailing the rumour he had heard in Ilgandah of her engagement to young Gillespie, and bantered his wife on her late need of his professional services.

"She doesn't look, does she, Mrs. Hilditch, as if there had been reason to have a doctor standing over her night and day for more than a week? I told Clare, when I came back that I hadn't seen her looking so young and handsome since she first arrived on the Leura."

"I think she is very handsome, certainly, Mr. Tregaskiss," replied Gladys, with boldness; "but if you think she is looking well, I don't agree with you; and I should say she wanted a lot of nursing and taking care of."

Geneste could not help giving her an approving glance. He had been a little afraid of the coming of Gladys Hilditch; now he felt sure of her sympathy.

She was a many-sided person, this young woman. In

European society she was all that there is of the luxurious modern. Here on the Leura she had a reaction in favour of barbarism, and declared that there was nothing she enjoyed so much as unadulterated nature, and that she was tired of London banalities. She was intensely interested in bush life; wanted to know all about the strike—she had come in at Cedar Hill for a demonstration against the free labourers, as the imported shearers from the south were called; inquired as to the large sheep-owners of the district; and, without once mentioning Ambrose Blanchard's name, contrived to get a good deal of information about the Cusacks, their household, and dependents.

Her lively chatter covered the embarrassment which was now inseparable from any intercourse between Mrs. Tregaskiss and Geneste, when it took place under the eye of others. What an ignorant, provincial sort of woman she was, after all, Clare reflected bitterly; how untrained in the ways of the world! Gladys, she thought, would have found in the situation only the piquancy of dramatic contrast. Every tone and gesture of this attractive lady seemed to indicate a perfect capacity for dealing with a shoal of contraband admirers. Blanchard's tone had suggested that her methods of distraction had not been altogether as admirable as East End visiting.

Dinner was over, they were all in the veranda, and Tregaskiss was showing off Ning's accomplishments, and making her go through her last *ghiribal*, which is the black for a song and dance representing the sound and action of some animal. Ning's *ghiribal* was of the wild musk duck, and her little arms flapped like wings, and she puffed out her cheeks as she moved and sang in imitation of the duck's cry:

"Ya naiya naringa
Puanbu ni go!
Mingo ahikarai!
Whoogh!"

"Did you ever see such a pickaninny, Mrs. Hilditch?" he cried, in boisterous delight.

Gladys was enchanted. Here was true local colour, and nature unadulterated. At last she had escaped from the asphyxiating influence of civilisation. She, too, must learn a *ghiribal.* Tregaskiss made the child repeat her performance. He was at his best when playing with Ning, and Gladys began to dislike her host a little less cordially.

By and by Cyrus Chance's camp-fire glimmered in the distance beyond the cluster of blacks' gunyas, and Gladys declared her intention of taking a moonlight stroll and paying him a visit. She did not ask Tregaskiss if he would escort her, an omission which made him sulky, and he retaliated on his wife by desiring her to remain and help him with his office work: that dreary business of writing down beneath the date all that had been done on the station that day: the number of cattle branded,—if there were branding going on,—the camps mustered, the rations given out. To-night Tregaskiss had more serious matters occupying him. The bank had written him a letter of warning, and had issued a veiled threat of sending a representative to report on the station. There were other payments to be made—the store account at Ilgandah, the fencers, and other items into which Tregaskiss did not enter in detail. It was a question of selling store cattle in order to raise money for immediate expenses, and the drought was threatening severely, and the market was bad. Then he propounded a scheme which had occurred to him during dinner. Could Clare "work her friend, Mrs. Hilditch," as he phrased it; get her to make a loan, or buy a small share in Mount Wombo, and so furnish a supply of cash.

Clare recoiled. Impossible! She felt that she would almost rather starve. It would be easier to apply to Cyrus Chance, hopeless as would be the result. Tregaskiss upbraided her for lukewarmness as regarded his interests. She cared for nothing as long as she had her ease, and

could stay at home cooling herself in the veranda with the children; but she would feel differently when she no longer had a roof over her head, and so on.

Clare gazed out into the night. The gaunt gum trees and the ghostly gidias seemed to mock the very suggestion of freedom. To be roofless and alone! The very idea was like letting in a rush of fresh wind. The passion of futile longing that seized her seemed unbearable. She got up and paced the room. Though the window was open, they did not seem to have a breath of air; the hum of the mosquitoes was maddening, and the flying ants circling toward the lamp, dropping their wings on the table-cover, increased the feeling of discomfort. Tregaskiss leaned back in the office chair smoking, and occasionally expectorating through the open window. He, too, got up, mixing himself a glass of spirits; he always kept it in the safe, where were the station ledgers and the strychnine for poisoning native dogs. Clare thought of Geneste and Gladys wandering by the lagoon—wondered if he were telling Gladys of her wretchedness. No, he was too loyal for that, he would know that she could not bear to be pitied, even by Gladys, just yet a while. She had exchanged no word with Geneste, except that commonplace good-night, since those in which he had told her of his love, and she had bade him never speak of it again. Did he mean to take her altogether literally? He might have written to her. There had been an opportunity at the last coming of Jemmy Rodd. Perhaps he had been afraid that her husband would open the letter. Had he in truth meant those words—had he not, perhaps, repented them? Her heart was crying out and hungering to hear them repeat, "I love you!" And he had never asked her if she loved him back. Oh, if she could go to him, and put her head upon his breast, and feel his arms round her, and say to him in his ear just once, as she had said to herself, "I love you with all my soul." Tregaskiss' rasping voice roused her:

"That mine has turned out no good, and the others are just as likely as not to be rank sells. By G——d! I'm sick of the whole concern. I feel that I want a jolly good spree, with a pleasant companion, and to throw worries to the devil for a bit, anyhow. What's the use of slaving and sweating to have the bank down upon you, and life to begin all over again. If it wasn't for the children—— I declare to Heaven that but for the Pickaninny, and if I could manage to make a lucky hit over one of these Wirra reefs, I'd cut the whole blessed business and never come back again! Don't stand like a stock there, Clare," he cried out; "go out, if you want to, and find your fine friend! You're jealous, I suppose, lest she should be flirting with Geneste. Go on out! You're no good to me! If I'd had a different sort of wife I shouldn't feel as I feel to-night."

She was moving away, but at the last words came back to him.

"How do you feel, Keith? Tell me what is really the matter with you, and I'll do my best to help you. I don't believe it's all money difficulties. You seem to me to have utterly changed since you were away that week at Ilgandah."

"That's true enough," he said moodily. "I found out something then that I hadn't known before, and it has upset me, that's all. But it has nothing to do with you."

"Then I won't ask any more," she answered proudly, "and I'll go out and find Gladys."

When she had gone Tregaskiss replenished his now emptied glass, and drawing his blotting pad to him, began to write in his big boyish hand:

"My Own Darling:

"I longed so for the sight of your dear little bright face, that I rode all the way over to the surveyor's to-day,—forty miles there and back,—and I couldn't have done it if I hadn't

changed nags at the fencers. You can just imagine my disappointment when I heard there that you had gone away from the Ococks, and that it was no use my going on. And now I don't know how I can see you, for that old dragon, Mrs. Cusack, doesn't approve of my paying you too much attention. I'm feeling uncommonly bad about it all, Hetty. Somehow, your caring for me, which I never guessed till just lately, seems to have altered everything and to have turned me from a steady-going, contented chap, into a reckless, miserable devil, not minding much what happens to him. It drives me mad to think of how jolly we might have been if everything was right, and then the thought of the Pickaninny, and all the rest of the wretched business, sends me mad again the other way. Though I hate the idea of losing you, I believe the right, unselfish course for me would be either to go straight away for a trip to England or somewhere—only I am too hard up just now to think of that. And failing my clearing out, it would be best for you to leave the Cusacks and find a home in another place, and if you forget me, so much the better for you. That's what I wanted to talk to you about, and I'll try and work a trip to Brinda Downs, if it's possible. Has Cusack finished his shearing, and where is he going to muster? You might suggest to the old lady to invite my wife's friend, a real——"

Tregaskiss had got thus far when Shand came in to report that part of the paddock fence was broken down, and that the mob of horses kept in readiness for the specials had taken to the bush. With an oath, Tregaskiss got up, putting the half written letter between the leaves of the station ledger in the cupboard, which he always kept locked, the key of which he now turned and put in his pocket. Then he followed the new chum out to see about sending black boys after the missing animals.

Meanwhile Clare wandered forth past the garden fence

toward the lagoon. In the distance she could hear Ning's shrill prattle, and remembered that Gladys had taken the child when she and Geneste started to find Cyrus Chance's camp. When she had gone a little way in the same direction, Mrs. Tregaskiss turned and made for the opposite end of the lagoon, where the gidia scrub grew almost to the water, and where there were no fires or sign of habitation. To meet Geneste now in the company of Mrs. Hilditch and of her child was more than she could bear. Then she heard her husband's "Coo-ee," and shout for Tommy George and the black boys to "murra make haste and go after yarraman that had bolted." She knew that he would be at the camp presently, and would, no doubt, join the others. In the moonlight she could see Gladys' white dress and tall figure as she stood in front of one of the gunyas watching a group of blacks playing cards on their blankets. To Gladys the blacks' camp had the charm of novelty, and Tregaskiss would be amused at her questions and would make the boys "show off," and forget his worries, whatever they might be. Clare did not love her husband. At times —Heaven forgive her!—she almost hated him, but she had always derived a certain satisfaction from the knowledge that whatever he might be to her she at least was necessary to him. This assurance had comforted and sustained her in "doing her duty," as unfortunate wives are apt to phrase to themselves the disagreeables of their lot. But since his return after her illness, she had been strangely conscious of aloofness on his part, jealous irritability alternating with sullen avoidance of her society, and this had affected her in a way which once she could hardly have believed possible. She attributed it to the change in her self, reacting upon him, sedulously as she strove to shut in the secret of her heart. To-night she had become aware, and with a sense of shock, that the change was in him, and that somehow there was a battle going on in his undeveloped nature; of elementary instincts warring with each other, love for

the Pickaninny, a certain fealty to her, and a strong impulse in another direction. Was it that he was simply bored with the life, longing to escape from his obligations, monetary, marital, and paternal,—the latter holding him back,—or could it be that he had conceived a sudden passion for another woman?—Miss Lawford was the only one who occurred to her mind.

At the thought a spasm of disgust shook her, not only at her husband and Miss Lawford, but at herself. Gloss and glorify it as she would, the bald fact remained that her feeling for Geneste was as much outside the law as his for Miss Lawford. They four were practically on the same level!

No, no! The finer part of her cried out in denial. Geneste was true and noble; and she, God help her! she would still "do her duty."

She came to a lonely little spot at the very edge of the lagoon—a tiny inlet closed round with black gidia trees growing rather apart, and so showing their strange funereal boles and melancholy gray foliage, with white, perfectly grassless ground beneath them. At the waters edge was a fringe of fast withering rushes, and sometimes there would be a rustle in it, a sort of long "tr—sse," like that of a silk gown, and the dead dry reeds would bend and break as a startled waterfowl rose with a discordant cry of alarm. She could hear, too, the shrill chirrup of the small tree frog, and the fat "poomp" of the bullfrog as it flopped into the water. The place was creepy; one or two white-barked saplings of the flooded gum looked like skeletons in the moonlight, and the water itself was black, with here and there a faint greenish-brown scum, or a few scattered leaves of the water-lily.

Clare seated herself upon a twisted root of one of the gidia trees protruding above the soil. Habit made her look first to see that there was no snake lurking near, then she bent forward, doubling herself, with her arms clasping her

knees and her head upon them, and her whole frame shaking with convulsive sobs.

She sobbed in sheer loneliness and desperation and longing—longing for the sweetness she must not taste; for the joy so near, which she might not stretch out her hand to seize.

The passion spent itself. Through her sobs she had been faintly conscious of low "Coo-ees." They might be calling for her. What did it matter? She knew that no one would come to seek her in this hiding-place, the security of which she had many times tested. She did not hear some footsteps which approached slowly, scarcely sounding in the devious course they pursued. But presently a voice said very low, and with an immense sorrow and yearning:

"Clare! Oh, my poor Clare!"

She raised her head and lifted her eyes, all wet and shining. Geneste was standing quite close to her, leaning against the trunk of a gidia tree, and looking down on her with eyes almost as bright as her own, from kept back tears.

"Oh, my poor Clare!" he repeated.

She tried to get up, but her limbs were stiff and cramped. He bent down and put his arm round her, lifting her bodily. When she was beside him he still kept his arm lightly round her, but he refrained from other caress or further words of tenderness. She, woman-like, almost resented the restraint he put upon himself, which, had she known it, cost him a hard tussle. Why was he so cold?

"Where are the others?" she asked.

"They've gone back to the house. Mrs. Hilditch was disappointed in her visit to Chance. She sent me on to announce her, but when I got to the tent I could see only what looked like a bundle of dirty clothes lying on a blanket inside and presently the old man grunted out: 'Be off with you! If you want anything from me, you won't

get it!' So I departed. We stopped with the blacks for a bit, and Ning did the interpreting, and Mrs. Hilditch has made herself pretty well acquainted with the family history of the tribe, and has arranged to photograph the lot to-morrow. Tregaskiss came down and joined us at the blacks' camp; then we coo-eed for you, and at last I said I would come and look for you." He had talked on, giving her time to recover herself.

"How did you know where I should be? Nobody ever comes here."

"Intuition told me. Spirit calling to spirit, rather. Do you remember once telling me that you came down sometimes in the evening, and sat by the lagoon among the gidia trees. I knew you would choose the most lonely spot, and I walked round the bank till I found you. Clare, it cannot be I who have made you so unhappy."

"No—yes; it all comes from the same thing."

"If I make you unhappy," he said, in a pained tone, "I had better go away and leave you to yourself. I had better come over here no more. But—I thought it might comfort you a little to know that there was a man near you upon whose devotion you might rely, and toward whom you would feel under no obligation—not even to return his feeling to the slightest degree."

As he spoke he withdrew his arm, in a slight movement of pique, which wounded her and made her desperate.

"You don't understand! I never had such a—such a relation in my life before. I never thought it would come. I have always been a straight woman. I cannot act falsehoods. I cannot look you in the face, and look my husband in the face—and know—I haven't cared for Keith,—or for the children altogether, because,—oh, poor little innocent things that I had no right to bring into the world!—because they were his. But I had made up my mind that I would do the best I could and that there should never be any reproach against me

—that I would keep myself apart from what was evil. And now," she went on hurriedly, looking away from him, "now, I am no better than anyone else. I have despised—others—and what am I? And perhaps it is this thing which has acted upon him—one does not know how evil in one's self and in other people acts back again; it is in the air. He, too! I thought he was straight and simple and that he was true to me, and that I could help him and perhaps do him good. And now, he too——" She paused, choked with a sob.

"You mean," said Geneste, surprised at what he supposed the cause of her agitation, "that your husband has been making rather a fool of himself about Miss Lawford. But he isn't capable—— You can't compare the two things. And why should it affect you so much? You must see that it is utterly beneath you, and not to be spoken in the same breath with my feeling for you."

"I cannot help it," she said helplessly. "I feel so lonely, and I am frightened."

The confession of weakness in her touched him infinitely, it put her on a new footing in regard to himself; it was as though she had appealed to him, with her armour doffed and her weapons thrown down, to maintain his chivalrous attitude toward her, to come no nearer, to respect her prohibition on words of love. He folded his arms stiffly and drew back into his former position against the tree.

"My poor child," he said, "do not be frightened of me! Have I not shown that I can obey you?"

"It is not that," she answered, very low. "It is that I——" She paused. "Can't you understand? It is that I am frightened of myself."

"Clare!" He had turned swiftly to her, his arms half unlocked. "I have never asked you if you care for me," he said. "I will not ask you now. I will not again say to you the words you have bade me not speak."

She kept her head away from him, though he could see that she was trembling, and he knew by instinct that a struggle was going on within her.

There was silence for a full minute, and the struggle ended, as such struggles always do end. She made a little piteous movement toward him and looked up into his face. And then he saw, what he had only before suspected, the height and depth of passion which this strange, self-contained, impassive creature was capable of reaching. Her whole face was changed; the still lips were quivering, the eyes had an indescribable expression of tenderness, her very form seemed pliable as a lily stem. She held out both her hands, and he clasped them in his. "Don't you see," she whispered; "it is that I love you?"

He gathered her up against him.

"Clare, ask me to say it, darling! Ask me yourself to tell you!"

"Tell me——"

"I love you! I love you better than my life; better than anything the world holds or ever has held for me!"

"Better than—that other woman?"

"Yes. That's past, gone, dead. This is a different thing altogether. That was a madness which nearly ruined my life—did ruin it in one sense. That was my perdition; this will be my redemption."

He kissed her.

"Are you lonely now, Clare?"

"No. I so wanted——"

"Are you frightened of me now?"

"I cannot tell, dearest. It is only for this once—just so that we may know—— It is not you that have failed; it is I, and I don't care. I *will* say it. I love you, my dearest. I'd like to stand out in the face of all the world and acknowledge it. I'm not ashamed of loving you, *you*, *you*, but I *am* ashamed of—— Oh, it can't go on! If we were to meet like this, and you kissed me,—it was so

sweet, so sweet!—I should long for you more and more. I should live only on the hope of seeing you. It's almost like that now. I should get to feel the life I must lead more and more impossible. No, no, you mustn't speak. I know what you are going to say. You must never say it. We mustn't let ourselves go on. The children—everything! It would be too ghastly. Once I lost self-control I shouldn't be able to bear it. I have always felt that. There comes a sort of exaltation in the trying to hold one's self in. One can smile and smile, and all the time one's heart is breaking and no one knows. I could do that till you came, and then you forced me to be myself, and that was what first made me know." Her words rushed out like a torrent escaping through loosened floodgates. He obeyed her literally, speaking never a word. "I couldn't go home and put the children to bed, and hear Ning say her prayers—after this. Not to-night. To-night it doesn't matter; nothing matters. But it's because I brought those little things into this dreadful world, and there's no one else; and I don't love them—not even as their father loves them. It's for that I must keep good. I mustn't have—this. Once, dearest, dearest, once of my very own self—what for no man in this world I have ever done or ever shall do. I never kissed anyone like that. Dearest, dearest of all,—the only one,—it is for *you!*

"Now we must go in. Never again! never, never! No words of love, nothing spoken; but we shall always know—always trust each other. I want to keep myself good. See, I shall make a vow—by my most sacred duty, my duty to the children. If I break it, God will punish me through them, through Ning—poor little Ning! I have made the vow. See!"

She drew from her dress the little old-fashioned cross she always wore and kissed it solemnly. Then silently she led the way back, and he followed her.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE "SPECIALS" ON DUTY.

GLADYS HILDITCH fitted curiously into the life at Mount Wombo. She did not seem to feel the heat, which was now becoming intense, and she did not greatly mind the mosquitoes. At any rate, they did not seem to sting her, or, if they did, no marks were left on her velvetty skin, —that thick, smooth kind of skin which does not sunburn easily and offers the least attraction to bloodthirsty insects. Snakes, scorpions, and centipedes she did, as she declared, draw the line at, but happily these were less common. Nor did she appear inconvenienced by the absence of those luxuries to which she had been accustomed. To be delivered from the whims and tyrannies of Parker, her maid, was, she assured them, emancipation. Luxuriant wavy hair, which grows low on a Clytie-like forehead and adorns a perfectly shaped head, can be becomingly dressed in a Greek knot at small trouble to its owner. There did arise a difficulty as to the starching and ironing of Gladys' wonderful robes of muslin and lace, but she solved it by getting out some pieces of China silk, which she had bought in Singapore, and which she concocted into garments rather after the chiton model, and which had the merit of not requiring frequent washing. There was something so complete about Gladys that it was hard to fancy her subject to the little sordid woes of ordinary humanity. She was never ruffled, or hot, or tumbled-looking. She seemed, somehow, a creature out of a poetry book, made to bask luxuriously in balmy air, to smile and chatter in her soft, languid voice, and to please and be

pleased by everybody. Cyrus Chance's simile of Fair Ines was not inappropriate.

They saw nothing of the old man for some little time. He took to going Port Victoria-ward by another route; and when, upon one occasion, Clare met him riding on the other side of the bore, and asked him why he did not continue his reformation of Mrs. Hilditch, he replied that he did not want to find her out a vain, wheedling woman, like all the rest, which he might do if there were other men in the way, and that, moreover, he didn't intend to give Tregaskiss another opportunity of making him eat dirt. "But tell her she has done the old miser good," he added to Clare, "and that maybe she'll find some time the only three days old Cyrus ever spent in a woman's company since he grew to manhood will be written down in his log. She and you, Mrs. Tregaskiss, have just given me a revelation of what the poetry women might be like."

Gladys laughed when Clare told her that she was the embodiment of old Cyrus Chance's dreams of "poetry women," and then she became grave.

"What's the use of being an ideal to ninety-nine men," she asked bitterly, "if the hundredth looks upon you as an incarnate fiend?"

"Who is the hundredth man, Gladys?" asked her friend.

"Never mind," Gladys answered. "Perhaps I shall tell you some day. You don't doubt, I suppose, that there have been the ninety-and-nine?"

"No; of that there could certainly be no doubt."

Gladys had a good many amusing stories of the suitors of various nationalities who, since her widowhood, had sighed at her feet, and of the struggle between love and lucre in the minds of some of them when they had discovered that upon her remarriage the five thousand a year would melt into nothingness. She had her cynical, sophis-

ticated way also of touching upon the modern social codes as regards the flirtations of married women.

"It's a disappointment, dear. The heroics and the platonics are so magnificent at the beginning, but they never last. The day always comes when it's a question with the man of all or nothing, and then worse luck for the poor woman if it's all, and worse still if she has the strength to make it nothing. Clare,"—and Gladys became suddenly earnest,—"don't believe in heroics."

"You used to preach them once, Gladys."

"Once! Ah, that was before I married Mr. Hilditch."

"Gladys, was he so very bad to you?"

"Bad! He was goodness itself—as far as loading me with diamonds, giving me everything I could want, and glorying in me as the most satisfying investment he had ever made, counts as goodness. He wasn't a bad sort,"—Clare remembered that Blanchard had used the words,—"he was good-natured till his illness increased, and made him gradually more and more irritable and unreasonable—but he was low, low, mean and vulgar. He didn't know what an ideal meant, everything he touched seemed to wither into something contemptible, something sordid as he was himself. To live with him was like being shut up without a single breath of pure fresh air, in a stove-heated atmosphere. The American railway carriages, with their closed ventilators and horrible money-making crowd of passengers, used to remind me of him. That was his view of life, and sharing it was the being slowly poisoned. Do you know, I used sometimes to look back upon the dirty old studio days—and mamma and her cheap art, and Cassandra's nonsense, and the dreadful second-rate actors and authors talking shop at our 'at homes,' which we always thought, in their way, just as bad as anything could be—with a positive longing. Oh, it was salvation to come across something disinterested, something noble, someone who did not live only for self, for making and spending

money, for eating and drinking, and racing and flirting—and worse ; someone who did not always impute mean motives, who could sacrifice worldly advantages for the sake of an idea—for the sake of honesty and self-respect." Gladys stopped. Her voice had deepened with gathering emotion. "Clare," she went on, almost in a whisper now, coming closer and kneeling down by the chair on which Mrs. Tregaskiss sat, with her sewing in her lap, "if you had been living my life, and felt yourself getting worse and worse, more vain and insincere, and dependent upon excitement, no matter of what kind, to distract from the inward gnawing, and if you had met such a one—a man unlike all other men you had ever known, wouldn't you have stretched out your hands to him as if he had been your saviour, and implored him to take pity upon you, and teach you what good meant——"

"Yes ; tell me, Gladys."

"Tell you !" Gladys suddenly rose, and her emotion ended in a bitter little laugh. "Clare, you know—you know ! Don't be deluded by it ; don't stretch out your hand ; don't think any good will come of it. It will be the old, old story. If he's human, he'll fall in love with you, and hate himself and despise you ; and if he is superhumanly good and strong, he'll despise you just the same—and desert you ; and all your life afterward will be just one long ache to win his good opinion again, so that you will go to the other end of the world for the chance of seeing him once more, and feeling yourself—forgiven."

Gladys walked to the open French window, and stood there looking out, saying nothing. Clare followed. Then as if to prevent her from making any comment on the outburst, Gladys cried :

"I'm going down to bathe in the creek, and I want Ning to come along, and we'll take the camera and afterward photograph the pickaninnies in a group. Clare,

there's a black boy riding up through the clearing, and he doesn't look like one of our lot."

"My word!" cried Ning, in mongrel English; "yarraman belonging to that fellow plenty knocked up."

"He's got rather the look of Gordon's last messenger," observed Gladys, "a sort of 'beleaguered city' air."

Gladys was not altogether wrong in her conjecture. Tregaskiss, who had been mending saddles in the workshop, came in presently with a letter in his hand. The boy had ridden over in hot haste from Brinda Plains, bearer of an urgent request from Mr. Cusack, that Tregaskiss would bring over such armed men as he could muster, for the protection of the Brinda Plains head-station and woolshed, upon which a large force of unionists were reported to be marching. He was also begged to send the news to Geneste. Mr. Cusack stated that he had already invoked the aid of the specials from Ilgandah, but that as they might be engaged on the same duty elsewhere, he considered it wise to appeal also to his neighbours. The letter concluded with an invitation to Mrs. Tregaskiss and her friend, if they should be nervous about remaining without sufficient guard at home, to accompany Tregaskiss and his men, so that all the ladies might be safely under one roof and duly protected. There was no danger of their encountering the marauders on the route, nor the slightest risk of violence to them, as the strikers were moving from an opposite direction. But it was well to be prepared against all possible contingencies, and if the alarm came to nothing, they could, no doubt, find sufficient amusement at Brinda Plains to repay them for the trouble of the long ride. Clearly, in Mr. Cusack's estimation, a stay at Brinda Plains under any conditions was preferable to residence at Mount Wombo.

There was a lofty patronage in the tenor of Mr. Cusack's invitation, blending amusingly with his evident alarm and anxiety to swell the force at Brinda Plains as

much as possible, which Gladys scented, and which provoked Mrs. Tregaskiss' scorn. Tregaskiss was as elated as a schoolboy; he wanted to set off at once. Clare demurred, and it was finally settled that he should start over by himself that evening, leaving the ladies to follow under Mr. Shand's escort on the following morning. Mr. Hansen was to be recalled from the out-station, to keep watch at Mount Wombo, and to send on the alarm in case of any attack, which was considered very improbable. Tregaskiss excused his haste to obey the summons on the plea that he might be able to pounce more easily on the men who had killed his horses. He was also going to take some spare horses, which would be left halfway, in readiness for the morrow. A long cavalcade started early the next morning. Mr. Shand drove the buggy with Mrs. Tregaskiss, the children, and Claribel. The baggage was partly strapped on behind, but Mrs. Hilditch's gowns necessitated a pack-horse as well, and Gladys rode beside the black boy who drove it. Gladys manner showed tension, and Clare divined something of her state of repressed excitement. She, too, was inwardly perturbed, for was she not going to meet Geneste? It was more than to be expected that he would obey the summons, for he would know that she had left Mount Wombo—she had taken the precaution of giving him this information, so that he might not be anxious and perhaps have a needless ride to assure himself that all was well. So Clare excused her letter to him, but she knew only too well that the craving to be with him was increasing day by day, and the repressive system which both had so far conscientiously pursued, seemed in both but to sharpen the edge of longing. Sometimes Clare wondered whether, in spite of her vow, barriers would one day be thrown down, and the touch of his lips, the pressure of his arms, be again courted in desperate heart-hunger which would endure no denial. Then she would fall on her knees and pray; and she would look at the little cross, which

was the symbol of all she held most holy, and recall the vow which she had made; she had superstitious dread lest, if she allowed herself to drift into more lover-like relations with Geneste, the expiatory penalty she had half invoked upon her child would be duly dealt forth.

So these two women had each their secret anxieties and passionate musings, as they went on their journey through the length of that tropical day. The heat was intense, and seemed reflected from the parched plain; the cattle, lean and thirsty, looked up pathetically from their scanty pasturage; the water-holes were dry and parched; the flies swarmed round the buggy; desolation and drought reigned on the face of the land. Then, when the plains ended, came more melancholy stretches of gidia scrub—the sandy flat with nothing but salt-bush growing beneath the stunted, dried-up trees, and as afternoon crept on, the stillness of noonday giving place to strange insect noises, whirring of locusts, and scuttering of iguana.

When they halted for the change of horses, Gladys gave a little shudder, and for the first time professed herself disenchanted with bush life.

"How have you lived all these years, with every faculty in you starved, and no hope of escape from these dreary desert plains?" she cried.

"Ah, you haven't seen the plains after rain and in the early spring," answered Clare. "They are beautiful then, with the sandal-wood in blossom, and the horrible lignum vitæ covered with the most beautiful white flowers. And here is someone worse off than I am."

They had stopped at a fencer's encampment, and a handsome, discontented young woman appeared at the opening of a tent which had a bough-shade in front of it, and invited them in. She took a baby out of a tub, which she turned upside down for Gladys to sit upon. "It's an outlandish place to see a lady," she said, "and you don't look like the bush, somehow." She made them some quart-pot tea, and

Clare, with her patient kindliness, took the dirty, crying baby on her knee and nursed it into quietude, while Claribel walked about with her own. Gladys helped to prepare the tea, and Ning prattled in her queer way; it was not an unpleasant interlude, and roused both the women, perhaps the fencer's wife too, from morbid dreams, bringing Mrs. Tregaskiss once more into the demesne of practical life. She talked to the fencer's wife about her baby, about the hardships of her lot, and bade her try and get over for a short holiday to Mount Wombo. They might perhaps manage to give her and the baby a lift on their return journey, she said; and then she had the pack unstrapped and searched till she found a tin of groats and some preserved milk for the child.

It was nearly dark when they reached Brinda Plains, and the many verandaed house, standing in its green garden, was, Gladys said, like an oasis in a march through Sahara. It did not seem as though the place were in particular need of an armed force to protect it, though there was a look of expectancy upon the faces of the men drawn up in an irregular line close to the woolshed, in the veranda of which a number of bales ready sewn up were waiting for cartage, and a row of carbines near them suggested preparations for siege. A party of ladies, among whom was Tregaskiss, were standing near the workings as the buggy drove up, and Helen, followed by Tregaskiss and Miss Lawford, came forward.

"Oh, Mrs. Tregaskiss, how nice of you to come and to bring Mrs. Hilditch! We did so want to see Mrs. Hilditch. Mother says that father's concern about the strikers was all a plant to get Mrs. Hilditch over,"—Helen did not disdain occasional Australianisms. "We have heard nothing more, and now we have got the specials, and we dance every evening, and it is really great fun. Miss Lawford and I are wishing that there might be an alarm every week."

Helen's greetings to Mrs. Hilditch were tempered with

awe. What a wonderful place must England be, if it produced only such beings as these two women, and was it a marvel that Englishmen did not take Australian girls to wife when they had the chance of marrying a Clare Tregaskiss or a Gladys Hilditch? Such were her reflections, and she did not know that both Gladys and Clare were studying her with a wistful interest, and wondering, in their turn, that Australian men should ever want to go elsewhere for their mates.

Miss Lawford was hysterically effusive, especially to the children. She insisted upon carrying the baby, and held Ning's hand as she walked beside the child's father. She had a fretted, anxious appearance, and her nervousness took the form of forced gaiety. Poor little mortal! she, too, meant no harm; she was only a loosely tied bundle of nerves and sensations, cravings for excitement and unhealthy impulses, tossed about at the caprice of fate, and rebounding with more or less force against the circumstances that environed her. Moreover, strange as it may appear, she was the victim of a genuine infatuation for Tregaskiss, one of those attractions of physique and temperament as compelling, after their fashion, as others of the more spiritual kind. His strong animal vitality dominated her nervous and morbid disposition, and gave her the stimulant her nature needed. The fact that he was married, and that she hated Mrs. Tregaskiss and wished to make her uncomfortable, had at first given zest to the flirtation now long past that stage, and which, to do Tregaskiss credit, would never have gone the length it had done, but for her encouragement and her sudden avowal that she was in love with him. "In love" expresses the feverish sentiment which consumed both; it is very doubtful whether either of the two was capable of love as a permanent condition.

Mr. Cusack was a little ashamed of his hasty summons.

"Told Tregaskiss that I knew it was the only way to bring you over," he said blusteringly. "It would never have

done for Mrs. Hilditch to leave the district without seeing Brinda Plains. Not that I'm one to 'blow,' as we Australians put it, but things are as they are, Mrs. Hilditch, and if this is considered the show place on the Leura, that's not my fault, is it?"

He was very attentive to Gladys. A beautiful widow with five thousand a year was a personage to command consideration. Mrs. Cusack, too, was anxious to show that they were thoroughly English, and that if the gentlemen did not don the regulation dress-suit for dinner, it was only because the heat compelled them to adopt a cooler costume. She insisted in summer upon immaculate garments of white duck, so she informed Gladys, and woe betide the unhappy traveller unsuitably equipped.

"Of course you know, my dear," explained the lady of Brinda Plains, "if a person sends in his name, it is understood in the bush that he is received into the parlour, but unless we see that he is a gentleman and accustomed to the ways of society, we do not *quite* treat him as one of ourselves."

Geneste was in the veranda when the Mount Wombo party arrived. He had come an hour or two earlier. At dinner, Mrs. Hilditch having been given the place of honour, he found himself beside Clare.

"Where is Mr. Blanchard?" she asked.

"Poor Blanchard! I don't think he was prepared for the surprise in store for him. He has been at Ilgandah after the specials, and only came back just before dinner. The new chums are having their meal at the bachelors' quarters,—like the grown-up children who are sent to the school-room when there's a dinner party,—to make room for our brave defenders."

The specials, mustering about a dozen, and their gray uniforms turned back with scarlet, made an agreeable variety among the white duck garments at the table. They were mostly young men, "the gilded youth of

Leichardt's Land, as the Leura *Chronicle* called them, who had volunteered for the occasion, and were having rather a good time among the Leura young ladies. Helen Cusack had one of them on her right, and young Gillespie on the other side of the table looked cross, and would hardly speak to another special who was his next neighbour. Clare noticed that he had lost his consumptive appearance, and Mrs. Cusack drew attention to this increase of flesh and colour, which she attributed to the excellent care she had given him.

"I wish I could have poor Mrs. Carmody over here for six months," said that good lady. "I'd make a cure with my egg flip and port-wine jelly, sooner than you will do, Dr. Geneste, with your drugs."

"I wish my drugs had a chance," said Geneste, "not that I believe in drugs anyhow, but Carmody won't have it that there is anything the matter, and will not let me suggest anything."

"Oh, well," said Mrs. Cusack comfortably, "she is much better again now, poor thing! such a colour, and in capital spirits. She needs to have a spirit, with all those children depending upon her."

"I wish you would go over and see Mrs. Carmody," Geneste said to Mrs. Tregaskiss. "She and her husband both dislike the Cusacks—except Miss Cusack, of course, and it is difficult for her to see much of them. She told me that she had taken a great fancy to you."

"I will go certainly; but how? We are a long way off."

"Not when you are here. If you stay long enough, we might ride over one day to luncheon—it is not more than fifteen miles. I can't help thinking you would be a comfort to her."

They fell into silence. To talk commonplace was difficult now, and nothing else was possible. Sometimes it seemed to Clare that words between them were not needed, the joy of being near each other, with the bond of perfect

sympathy uniting their souls, was sufficient to make all conditions paradisaic, and then at other times she had a desperate sense of revolt against limitations, and told herself that it would be almost better never to see him at all than under such restraint. To-night, once or twice she became conscious that Helen Cusack was watching them, and there was something in the girl's wistful gaze which went to her heart. What right had she to come and take away Helen's lover? for she had an intuition that, but for her, Geneste would now be Helen's declared suitor. Geneste himself, to a certain extent, shared this feeling, and could never rid himself altogether of a sense of disloyalty. Helen was in truth very unhappy, but she had a brave heart, and determined that Geneste should not suspect her secret. Least of all would she have it suspected by Mrs. Tregaskiss, though as yet her vague fancy that Geneste had any deeper regard for Clare than that of a friend had not definitely shaped itself in her mind. But the mind of a pure girl is, unconsciously to itself, a touchstone. Helen was wretched, because her instinct told her that there were complications in the lives of those around her, not all for good. She wished that her mother would send away Miss Lawford; she wished that Mr. Tregaskiss could be induced to take less whiskey, and, in their preparations for this evening, she had begged Mrs. Cusack to be less liberal with the rum in her concoction of the Leura mixture. It was, however, hardly necessary to give Mrs. Cusack the warning, for as a matter of fact the neighbourhood was by this time pretty well aware of Tregaskiss' weakness. "What a pity!" people said,—those at any rate who felt themself unassailable in the matter of too free indulgence in "nips,"—"such a good-looking fellow, and sociable and open-handed, too, when the humour took him—though he could be near enough in some ways, and, unlike old Cyrus Chance, whose bark was always worse than his bite, free in promises, though not so ready in fulfilment."

Tregaskiss was morosely silent, and his eyes had a wild look. Clare watched him with dread. She was always nervous when with him in company, and she, too, was silent and preoccupied. The dinner went, however, in other respects merrily enough. The specials had a great deal to say for themselves. Mr. Cusack talked loudly, and Gladys was feverishly animated in her quiet, well-bred way. She responded readily to Mr. Cusack's sallies, but her eyes wandered searchingly round, and she paled at the sound of any stir outside. After dinner, when they were all sitting in the veranda, a little troop of tall men in white clothes filed out through the drawing-room, and Mrs. Cusack called out:

"Come, Mr. Shand, I hope you got properly looked after at the quarters! You see, we are rather crowded out. Mr. Blanchard, I hope you have brought down some songs. I am sure Mrs. Hilditch would like to hear them. Come and be introduced to Mrs. Hilditch. This is Mr. Blanchard," she added to Gladys. "He has not been so very long out from England, and so you should have plenty to talk about. We all chaff Mr. Blanchard about being so very English."

CHAPTER XX.

GLADYS PLEADS.

Ambrose Blanchard bowed profoundly. Gladys half rose and held out her hand.

"Mr. Blanchard and I have met in England," she said.

Mrs. Cusack was all amazement. "And you never told us!" she exclaimed reproachfully to the young man. "And when we were all so excited at hearing of Mrs. Tregaskiss' English friend—we don't often have such visitors on the Leura," she added, turning to Gladys,"—"I think it is very strange of Mr. Blanchard to have kept so close about you."

"Not at all strange," replied Gladys, with self-possession. "There are other Mrs. Hilditches in the world; it is a very common name, and I have several sisters-in-law. Come," she said, making a dexterous movement, which swept her squatter's chair well back into the shadow of a vine, and motioning, with a little imperious movement, to Blanchard to obey her signal, "do sit down and tell me everything that has happened to you since we met."

He drew another chair beside her. Far less composed than she, it was a minute or two before he answered. That moment of silence was big with memories. To Ambrose Blanchard, Gladys Hilditch represented the supreme temptation of his life; he had fled from her in distrust of himself, and, as she believed, in scorn of her.

"There is not much to tell," he said. "I've knocked about and roughed it a good deal; and I made a little money at the gold fields, and then I lost it; now I am here, learning something about the management of sheep,

with an idea of going into partnership with some likely person later on." He paused, and she said nothing. Now that they were out of the range of Mrs. Cusack's eyes, she made no attempt to keep up the farce and play the part of a tourist amused at and inquisitive about everything around her. "It is very good of you," he added, "to be interested in my doings."

Still she made no reply.

"Have you—have you," he asked nervously, "seen anything of my people?"

"You know we gave up Felmarshes," Glady's returned, without directly answering his question.

"I had not heard. But of course there must have been a difference," he said vaguely. "I know nothing; nobody has written."

"I heard from Gertrude not long ago; she said they had had a letter from you."

"Poor Gertrude! I conclude that my father has forbidden her to hold communication with his renegade son."

"She says that she is bound by her promise to him. I think she interprets it rather too literally."

"Well, I suppose that a wife is bound to obey her husband," he replied. "I confess that I had little hope of any good coming from her intercession. However, her boy will be the gainer—though that was not the point. But I have nothing to say against Gertrude," he added. "She was a very good stepmother."

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Blanchard would perform always what was in her bond," said Gladys; "but she would not do anything more, especially if it were against her interests."

"Perhaps! And you don't know anything about my father—poor old chap?" Blanchard spoke with feeling.

"I know that he is looking dreadfully aged; and though he is as hard as a rock, and will never go from his word, I am sure he frets a good deal about you."

"Then you have seen him?" cried Blanchard eagerly.

"I went down to see him ; and it was he who told me where you were. I wanted to be able to give you the last news of him—if we should meet."

"That was good of you ; but—— So it was of no use?"

"No, it was of no use. If you want to do any good, you must go home."

"I can't do that," Blanchard answered. "I am like my father ; and I cannot go back from my word. He was looking ill, you say?"

"Yes ; infirm and broken. Mr. Blanchard, do not be stubborn; go home and be reconciled."

"I am afraid that is impossible," he answered. There was a pause and then he said : "I am very glad, since you decided to visit Australia, that you should have come where we were certain to meet."

"I—— Of course I should naturally want to be with Clare Tregaskiss. We were girls together."

"I remember your telling me that you had a friend in Australia, but I only learned the other day that it was Mrs. Tregaskiss."

Again there was a pause. He went on in a conventional tone :

"You must have been sorry to give up Felmarshes."

"No, I was not sorry," she added. "It was while we were in Egypt that winter—after you left—that Mr. Hilditch got so much worse. We never went back to Felmarshes again."

"I was very sorry to hear of your loss," he said, still conventionally.

"Oh, don't let us talk as if we stood quite outside the truth of everything!" Gladys exclaimed, her whole manner changing, as she turned her eyes on him for an instant in piercing reproach. "You must know how I feel about it; and how I have hated myself. But I,"—she faltered, and there came into her voice the break as of tears,—"I tried to do what I could for him."

"Indeed, I am sure of that."

"I don't know why you should be so sure of it," she answered, with a sad little laugh. "Your opinion can't have altered much, and you never thought well of me in old days—not even as well, perhaps, as I deserved. You never gave me credit for being sincere about anything. You looked upon me as a mere vain, heartless creature of moods, living for the distraction of the hour and taking my moral hashisch in whatever form it happened to offer itself—society, gambling, amateur philanthropy, religion, preaching woman's wrongs——"

"Or breaking men's hearts," he put in bitterly.

"Yes; I know what you are thinking of. Well, I'll admit it; breaking men's hearts, if you choose." Her voice had become hard, and she spoke with a defiant accent. "It was a bad business, that of your friend, the Socialist. It cured me of my East-End mania and of my democratic tendencies. It cured me of other things, besides."

"Don't!" he exclaimed, half stretching out his hand as though her words and manner hurt him too severely.

"Yes, I know. You are thinking that I am as heartless as ever—that I am glorying, perhaps, at this moment, in the thought that a man killed himself because of me. You meant me to know that; you did not spare me. I got his letter—and the rest. The outside envelope told me that you had sent it—that you had guessed I was the woman he meant. I knew that *he* was the reason that you never came to see me any more."

"Ironside was my friend—and I saw him lying dead."

"Do you think," she cried, "that I, too, haven't seen him lying dead—night after night, in my dreams, and when I have wakened up cold, in the darkness, and trembling with terror? Would you believe that I nearly died of the horror of it? And do you think, too, *that* would have happened if I had met you before I met him?"

"I don't know. How can I tell. I suppose a bird of prey must obey its instincts."

"A bird of prey! Oh, you *are* cruel!"

She leaned back in the chair, drawing her body together with a slight shudder. For several minutes neither spoke. A lamp was moved within, and the light of it streamed through the French window on to Gladys' face. It gave him a shock to see how her face had changed; and how that sudden look of age had come upon it. Just then there was a noise and stir, as Mr. Cusack, followed by some of the gentlemen who had remained in the dining-room, came out and spoke to a trooper waiting outside. He had to report news communicated by a traveller, stopping for the night at the huts, to the effect that the unionists, hearing the station was so well guarded, had abandoned their warlike purpose, and were quietly dispersing. The incident occasioned some flutter in the veranda, and under cover of it Gladys rose, withdrawing from the light. Blanchard got up, too, and was making a formal excuse for leaving her, but she stopped him.

"No, no! What does it matter about the unionists? I felt that the prospect of an attack was too good to come true. It would have been exciting; but I am doomed to be disappointed. Well, aren't you saying to yourself: 'That is just how she used to be; the bird of prey instincts are so strong in her still'?"

"No," he replied. "I am sorry I said that. I see that it wounded you."

"Come out into the garden," she said abruptly. "I see there are people walking about. I can make out Dr. Geneste and, is it Clare—or pretty Miss Cusack? Ah, it's Clare! I wonder you did not fall in love with Miss Cusack. But, perhaps you *have* fallen in love with her?"

He made an impatient gesture of denial.

They were in the garden now, walking between the little avenue of orange trees. Gladys stopped to comment

upon the stars—to ask questions about the southern constellations. She thought the Southern Cross overrated; and she had seen nothing on the Leura yet, in the matter of atmospheric effect, comparable to the Egyptian afterglow. She had observed, also, that the fashion of sleeves in the bush was in the same stage of evolution as in the remoter districts of London. That means survival of monstrosity. "Please observe the cut of mine. The sleeves in the London streets got on my nerves; they were making me seriously ill—they, and other things; it's always the last straw, you know. When I told my doctor, he suggested a trip into the wilds of Africa or Australia. But you see that there's no escape for me. That little, dark, prettyish, fifth-rate-looking governess, whom Mr. Tregaskiss seems to admire, would do credit to Westbourne Grove. There's one atrocity of civilisation, however, that I don't find here. Cook hasn't yet vulgarised the blacks."

"No doubt they are being demoralised by more pernicious influences of civilisation."

He spoke awkwardly. Her inconsequent chatter, veiling, as he felt it did, an agitation she was afraid might master her, afflicted him terribly, and when she answered with her soft, falsely-strung laugh:

"Oh, of course, human nature is the same all the world over, and the vices of barbarism are pretty much what one finds them in London drawing-rooms."

"I am beginning to discover that here already!" he exclaimed impetuously. "It is my turn now to beseech you that we may not talk banalities. At least let us be true to ourselves."

"Even to our vices?" she asked, laughing again; and then went on in a totally different tone:

"Yes, that's what I came to Australia for. I wanted to tell you the truth about something."

"To tell me!" he repeated.

"You can't accuse me this time of not being candid. It is not often a woman has the honesty to own to a man that she has travelled twelve thousand miles—more or less—on the chance of seeing him. Let us sit here."

She had halted at the seat under the passion vine, to which he had almost unconsciously led her, as the most retired which the garden offered. He did not obey her invitation to place himself by her side, but stood leaning against the trellis, and there was something aloof and judicial in his aspect—the result indeed of nervous tension and not of disapprobation—which goaded her to desperate frankness.

"I wanted to tell you the whole truth about my relations with Mr. Ironside. I never talked to you much about him. I did not know you were such great friends till—after everything was over. I never saw you together."

"We were not much together—at that time, and 'great friends,' in the ordinary sense, we were not," he answered stiffly. "We had different grooves of action. I may say now that I did not sympathise entirely with poor Ironside's methods, which latterly got too anarchic for my taste. As the demagogue, I confess that he jarred a little upon me, but as the man——"

"Ah, the man! He was one by himself."

"As the man, he influenced my life more than any other human being has done. It was he who first inoculated me with socialistic theories—notions that I feel now to have been mistaken. He first brought home to me the virtue of intellectual honesty, and made me feel the absolute necessity of giving up the Church. He was like the spark to the tow, and his enthusiasm carried one along with the force of a high wind driving a flame. Then I admired his immense resources; his power of organisation. His very fanaticism was inspiring."

"He was a fanatic in everything," assented Gladys.

"He was bound to die for something before reaching his prime ; a cause, perhaps as little worthy—as the woman." Her voice dropped. "It is not heartlessness which makes me speak of him in that impersonal way," she said gently. "Please believe that. I have thought and felt so much about him, that I have got to look upon him more as an instrument of fate than as an ordinary human being. For me, too, in a very different way, he has been a determining influence."

She stopped. Blanchard seemed to be waiting for her to explain herself further. She began again, the words rushing forth impulsively, with scarcely any break :

"Mr. Blanchard, I want to say to you, in my own extenuation, what you never gave me a chance of saying. I don't suppose my conduct deserves to be extenuated, but at any rate you shall know now the exact truth about it, and you shall think me, then, as bad as you please. It was not vanity and greed of conquest which in the beginning made me see all I could of John Ironside. It—it was something of the same kind of feeling which later"—she hesitated—"later drew me to you. My attraction toward him was a coarse, crude attempt at realising that feeling—in him—which was afterward realised in you. Oh, people make such a mistake in supposing that women's instinct always guides them straight in matters of that kind! One's nature has a need, and the first attempt to satisfy it is as elementary, often, as the savages' fetish-belief. I don't know how to make you understand——"

"I think I do understand," he said, still with the suggestion of aloofness in his manner. "You thought Ironside might help you as you afterward fancied—mistakenly too—that I might be able to help you. Perhaps we might have helped you, one or other of us, if we had been less human and you—a different sort of woman."

"Ah!" A gleam of joy came into Gladys' face. "Yes, *you* might have helped me," she said slowly. "You

might have done a great deal for me. But you would not; you deserted me. John Ironside could not have helped me—in any real way. There was no real affinity. The elements of combination weren't there. It was an accidental attraction—one that had nothing to do with spirit, though the attraction was genuine enough, at first. He happened to come into my life at a critical moment, when I was in a mood of intense revulsion, and when I was utterly rudderless. For the moment he dominated my nature, and his charm for me was that for the first time I encountered what seemed a granite man. We acted and reacted upon each other. I think the influence must have had something electric in it."

"Yours upon him was certainly of that kind."

"In the beginning it was the fascination of repulsion, for him, anyhow, I fancy. And then the poles changed. For me he was something positive, compelling. He forced life upon me in its hideousness, its reality, its magnificent power—life in the big thrilling sense, not in that of my drawing-room drama. He made me long to experience the grip of strong feeling—of an intoxication which freed one from one's self. You know—— No, you can't know, or guess, what my marriage was to me—the awful deadness of it. Sometimes I feel that Clare Tregaskiss knows and understands, but she is strong, she can hide what she suffers under that strange quiet smile, and I long to tell her, to talk to her of it, and I dare not. Oh, how one agonised for a breath of something pungent. I tried to get it in—well, you know the sort of flirtations a London woman falls into—and the kind of men. I tried everything to give me sensations—even to reading horrid French novels; and then I went on a pilgrimage to Lourdes for my soul's healing. John Ironside was the person to appeal to me in that mood. There wasn't the least thought, at first, of making him love me. The East-End mania was genuine. Then there came a dreadful

moment when that excitement palled, and I saw another excitement,—straight in front of me,—one I'd never had before. I saw that the granite was softening—that he was beginning to care for me. I thought I should like to know what it felt like to be loved by such a man. I wanted—this is all I have got to put forward in extenuation here—I wanted to be made to care for him ; to be strung up to some heroic endeavour, even to renunciation. I knew that was what love must mean—for me. I was never a wicked woman in that sense."

"You need not tell me that!" he exclaimed hoarsely.

"Well, I told myself that a real affection, a real interest, would be my salvation. I wanted to believe in his aims and to help him in them—to do some work and, anyhow, devote some of my superfluous cash to the relief of those wretched, starving creatures—— You remember that strike winter? But when I saw that he was fighting against my influence, steeling himself and keeping away from me, the devil took me in possession and I longed to win the battle. I determined that I would conquer and that he should own himself beaten. That was just before we took Felmarshes."

Blanchard bowed his head.

"Well—you know—I heard you preach. I saw your face so worn and so 'lifted'—I don't know how to express it. You've lost that look a good deal. It moved me ; it was a Savonarola look. I got that sort of feeling about you, that you would be the person to go to in trouble. And then you came and dined with us. We had a lot of people, do you remember?—the racing set. I was so ashamed of them. And we went to the Manor. And then there was the fever in the village, and you seemed to *want* to fling away your life in looking after the poor people. Do you remember that autumn?"

"Don't let us speak of it," he replied with emotion. "I remember it all too well. I remember your wonderful

courage during that fever time—your generosity and devotion, and how you seemed to be trying to show me that under the frivolous mask, and amid all the luxury and thoughtless selfishness of life in that palace on the hill, there was the stuff of which ideals are made. I was wrong in saying that it was entirely Ironside who influenced me at that crisis in my life. You influenced me greatly, too. Your words and ways, and the trust you placed in me, undeserved as it was, forced me to be true to the highest standard I knew, that of sincerity."

"And you preached that sermon—that wonderful sermon which was like a bomb in the peaceful household. And you gave up everything, and were banished from your inheritance, and went to work among the dockers in London. I have kept all the letters you wrote me then—all that I ever had from you."

He was visibly moved.

"I used to think," she went on in a childlike way, "that you were to me something of what Daniel Deronda was to Gwendolen."

"Oh, do not say that!" he cried.

"It is true. I leaned on you in the same way."

"I was not in the very least a Daniel Deronda."

"Oh, you always said the conventional thing about him—that he was a woman's hero, and not flesh and blood. Perhaps that is true, but it did not alter Gwendolen's feeling. If Daniel had had reason to believe Gwendolen insincere in her professions toward him, and utterly unworthy in every way, no doubt he would have acted like a man's man, a flesh and blood person, and he would have run away in anger and disgust, and have left her to her fate, even if there had been no Myra in the case."

"There was no Myra in the case," said the young man in a stifled voice.

"No, there was only John Ironside. And when you found out that your Gwendolen had said the same things

to John Ironside, almost, as to you; had appealed to him to teach her, in quite a different way—but you would not have known that; you would have thought it all just the same, all part of the play, when you found out that she had worked for him among the London poor, as I did for you among the poor near Felmarshes, and all the time only as a reason for getting into touch with you, only as the lure of a coquette, only to lead up to the thrill of a dramatic situation! 'Frightfully thrilling, you know,' Hilda Wangel would say! But, I forgot, you left England before Ibsen became the fashion. Oh, well! it was no wonder you thought——"

"That she was preparing the same fate for me."

"With all the same art and the same guile. Oh, yes, you might have said to yourself: 'One fine day, when the play begins to get wearisome, this double-faced wretch will throw off her mask, and I shall see her as she is in her abominable selfishness and callous greed of power, just as *he* saw her at the last.' You might very well have expected to find that she had only been amusing herself, playing a sort of game of chess with your sanctities, which she had talked so finely about, just to make you believe her a simple, innocent creature; and then when she had checkmated you, and the battle held no more interest, sweeping them off the board and bidding you go about your business, and leave her to find a new amusement. Oh, how you would despise her! How you would hate her!"

"No, never that!" he interrupted.

"And how you would glory in hurting her—as it was in your power alone to hurt her—with your silent contempt! When she had humiliated herself, thrown herself at your feet——"

Gladys' voice was choked. She threw her arms over the back of the seat and buried her face in them; he could see that she shook with inward sobs.

"Not to hurt her," he said, deeply troubled; "but to save myself."

"You did not give me credit for any human feeling," she went on presently, lifting her head, but not looking at him. "Did you think me such an unnatural monster that I could bear to know myself the cause of a man killing himself, and not die almost myself with shame and horror and remorse? You don't know how I suffered! Oh, you don't know how I suffered!"

"I can believe it—now."

"If you had only answered my letter—if you had come to see me just once again, I would have told you." She spoke very low, and her words fell brokenly. "It was you who opened my eyes—at Felmarshes; you made me want to be good, to strive after the highest—affection. It wasn't that kind of feeling he had for me. He let himself go mad, I think. One idea possessed him. He was the sort of strong man, who, when he gives way, does so utterly, allows himself to be absorbed, overwhelmed, by one desire. And when he can't gratify it—— Don't you understand? How could I foresee that he would want—*that*. He would have had me give up everything for him, altogether? He would not believe that I had never cared for him—in that way. No, never, never for one instant. Then I got reckless, too, and I told him just how it had been—and my badness, and how I had purposely, at the end, led him on. And then how knowing you had made me realise—— I said that I would do all I could to blot the remembrance of him out of my life. Then he said things—about you. He—— It drove him wild. He said he would kill you—or himself. And the next I heard was that he was dead. And I tried to make you know, and you would not——"

"Ah!" Blanchard cried, "I understand! There was something that was always a mystery, something between him and me, the night he shot himself. I know now."

Gladys got up and stood before him.

"I have told you, and I have nothing more to say. I came all the way to say this—all the way to Australia. Try not—not to think—so hardly——"

Her words seemed to melt into a sob. She turned swiftly, and was some paces from him before he spoke.

"Gladys!" he called, but she would not turn back, and he saw her white form vanishing like a ghost behind the orange trees.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE FIRE.

Tregaskiss was sleeping the heavy sleep of the inebriate. He had finished up the evening, without the restraining influence of ladies' society, at the bachelors' quarters; had come late to his room, and had thrown himself, only half undressed, on the bed outside the coverlid, beside his sleeping wife. The long journey in the heat, and physical fatigue, had made Clare drowsy. When she awoke, toward the small hours, it was to the sound of the baby's wail, and to that of her husband's stertorous and fume-laden breathing. She had been dreaming a most poetic and tender dream, in which she and Geneste were wandering together by the banks of a broad, blue lake, which she imagined to be Lake Eungella, with heavenly moonlight streaming down upon the waters and a gentle wind ruffling its surface into tiny waves, which threw back opaline rays from their crests of foam. It was some moments before she could convince herself which was dream, which reality. She drew the baby to her side, hushed and fed it from the bottle placed in readiness, and presently it went to sleep again.

The night was very warm. She was drowsy still, but the inert form beside her brought nightmare thoughts. Her observations of the evening evoked suggestions of possible freedom, at which she recoiled, and which, mercifully, were only suggestions, never taking the form of definite desire. How could she wish for that which, while both lived, was only to be gained through wrong-doing. The ghastly doubt presented itself: Was it, in truth, sin to

obey nature's ordinance, whether in the higher or lower scale of being—the ordinance that bade the birds of the air choose their mates, and, till the offspring were fledged, at least, be faithful to them? Their offspring! Here lay the human responsibility. Clare touched the little soft, sleeping thing beside her, and wondered at the curious, impersonal sort of feeling she had for it, and wondered, too, if she would have felt differently had it been the child of the man she loved.

She got up and put on her dressing-gown and slippers, and then lay down on the sofa before the open window, gazing out into the velvetty dimness. The sky was very dark. Clouds, those ineffectual storm-clouds, had obscured the stars, and the darkness seemed full of curious noises: rustlings, stealthy creepings, insect murmurings, distant cries of curlews and native dogs—sounds that only intensified the loneliness of the summer night. Those same thoughts which had visited Clare as she had lain awake at Cedar Hill, waiting for her husband's coming, came to her now. In her mind's eye she seemed again to see written in everything nature's law of dual oneness, and in horrid mockery of the eternal pattern, modern man's law of marriage, the copy and the antithesis of it. Why should it be a necessity of evolution, the antagonism between nature and man? What was the good of revelation and theology and the so-called higher progress, if it only brought about this fundamental discord, upsetting the whole order and balance of the social universe, which had need but be in harmony with nature for the worst kind of pain to be done away with? What was the meaning, what the purpose, of so much useless suffering? Did the generality of people suffer in the same manner, or was it that there were certain temperaments originally planned in harmony with the great cosmic chords, to whom dissonance was sheer spiritual agony?

Clare Tregaskiss' poor, tormented soul, torn with love

and longing and the upbraidings of conscience, groped helplessly in a maze of those mysteries which, from the time that the Sphinx propounded her question, have been left unsolved. Had she realised that the capacity to feel such pain, susceptibility to such discord, are the first dawnings on the soul of a higher existence, it is doubtful whether she would have been greatly consoled; for the doctrine that to love most is to suffer keenest, and that to suffer most keenly is to be liberated soonest from the thrall of fleshly affections, does not appeal to the poor human in his first stage of regeneration. The thrall is dear, the throb of passion sweet, and love, the divine, has its feet on earth, though its head be in heaven. The conflict between soul and sense has ever furnished forth the battle-ground in which saints have been worsted and heroes overcome, and the cup of renunciation, offered though it be by ministering angels, has ever been the most unwelcome to the thirsty heart.

Clare did not know how long she stayed on the sofa; she must have fallen asleep, or if not, fancied that she had done so while her eyes drooped, for when she looked out again the night showed a feeble glow—a glimmer touching the near trees that made her think it must be close on sunrise. The glow deepened, more quickly and less steadily than that of daybreak; the shiny leaves of the orange trees seemed to quiver in it, and the tall feathers of the bamboos to stand out illuminated as in a transformation scene. Then Clare became alive to a curious faint roaring as of wind rushing afar. Could it be a cyclone? One heard it a long way off. But there was not that strange brooding, and the feeling as of a world's breath drawn inward, which heralds such a storm. But yet she fancied it had grown hotter, and she fancied, too, that she smelt smoke, like that of twigs burning.

Suddenly there was a startled clang, the big bell of the workings crashing through the stillness of the night. Then

came shouts, at first indistinct from distance, then caught up nearer, and now sounding close in the garden and verandas.

"Fire! Fire! The house is on fire!"

Mrs. Tregaskiss darted from the sofa to the open French windows and looked out. White figures were already rushing from the house; a tongue of flame leaped through the casement of a room at the end of the wing just beyond her own; she could hear the crackling and sputtering of the woodwork. There were frantic calls coming from different directions. Mr. Cusack in pajamas ran down the veranda calling wildly for "Men! Where were the men! Somebody go and call up the men!" Presently came the tramp of the specials, and of the gentlemen who slept at the bachelors' quarters, the house being given up to the Cusack family and their married and lady visitors.

Clare ran back to her room and seized the baby from its cot. Tregaskiss slept on; she shook and called him.

"Keith, get up! Keith, the house is on fire!" but to no purpose. Then as she was seizing a heavy jug of bath water to pour it upon him, a hand interposed and Geneste's voice said collectedly:

"I will get him up. Don't be frightened. You've got baby. Just collect some of your things; the fire has started close here. There's no danger at all, but I want to get you quietly to the garden. Where is Ning?"

"Ning!" Clare had almost forgotten the child, who had been put with Gladys in a room in the main body of the house. She ran along the veranda, the infant in her arms, meeting, as she went, white-clad figures with terrified faces, too intent upon themselves to take any notice of her. Mrs. Cusack, keeping her self-possession, was directing the removal of furniture, and with her own hands dragged out heavy cabinets and chests of drawers. Helen, very pale, young Gillespie helping her, passed in and out with bundles of books, pictures, and clothes; Miss Lawford, shrieking

hysterically, rushed hither and thither, till Mrs. Cusack sternly bade her not make a fool of herself, but give a hand in the work. Mr. Cusack, like most cowards, losing his head, roared contradictory orders to the band engaged in handing up buckets of water, and in plying the hose laid from the lagoon to which the Brinda Plains garden owed its beauty. Clare gave quick glances at each group and person, but there was no Gladys, no sign of Ning. Her heart began to grow sick for the child. Just then a shower of sparks rose from the back roof of the main building, showing that the fire must have broken out in two places.

"Oh, Mrs. Tregaskiss, its awful!" ejaculated the mistress scarcely pausing in her labour. "Those dreadful unionists—— Ning! She's with Mrs. Hilditch—the spare room at the end."

Clare's speed quickened at the information. The fire was gaining at the very spot Mrs. Cusack, with a hurried jerk of her head, had indicated. Clare turned an agonised face as she ran. "They are nowhere about. They must be in there. Oh, won't someone come and help me!" she cried. Steps hurried at her call. Blanchard, who had been in the string of specials with buckets, broke away at sight of Mrs. Cusack's gesture. He looked very white and determined, and all the time that he had been passing buckets his eyes were watching for Gladys, and he could not have waited a moment longer without assuring himself that she was in safety. He snatched up a 'possum rug.

"I know the room," he said. "I'm coming."

"She always locks her door," Clare panted. "Gladys—— You must break it in. Oh, make haste! It's Ning, my Ning!"

"Put the baby down," cried Blanchard, pressing forward, "you may want your hands. But don't come in unless I call. They're safe, Mrs. Tregaskiss; the fire hasn't got there yet. Gladys will be safe."

He said the last words definitely, as though he took to himself in that moment the right in all that concerned Gladys, and wished to announce it to the whole world. Nevertheless, smoke was coming out of the crevices of the French window, closed tightly. Gladys had a foolish terror of the wide-open doors and windows of the bush. She was not afraid of burglars or black fellows, but of snakes, and so she always shut everything that gave on the ground. Blanchard dashed himself against a window. There was a shivering of glass, a shattering of woodwork, and a little figure in a white nightgown, holding a black doll to its breast, darted out of the smoke and clutched at Clare's skirt.

"Oh, mummy, mine plenty frightened! Mine think it debil-debil come along a big fire. Mine call out plenty loud. Ba'al any good. Gladys altogether asleep."

Clare gathered the small creature to her bosom. "Oh, Ning, my Ning!" she cried, half sobbing. The mother instinct, roused to a fierceness which she could hardly have believed possible, vindicated nature in having made her a woman. She felt an agony of tenderness and of remorse for the black thoughts which had haunted her morbid hours. The emotion so filled her, that with Ning in her arms she forgot for an instant that Gladys was in danger.

Only for an instant. She put the child away, bidding her take care of baby over there on the grass, and leaped into the stifling smoke, to be confronted by Blanchard bearing Gladys' inanimate form from which the opossum rug trailed.

"Go back," he said; "it's all right, but the curtains were catching. She is not burned, but she must have air—and water, please, from somewhere."

Clare flew again. When she came back with water from one of the bedrooms, Geneste had joined her, and Tregaskiss behind him, wakened and sobered into complete possession of his senses, was calling frantically: "Picka-

ninny! Pickaninny! Oh, where's daddy's Pickaninny! Oh!"—at sight of the child—"thank God she's all right!"

He carried off Ning, lifting up the baby also, which was crowing with glee at the sight of the flames. Clare saw him, with the two children, moving away, all three rejoicing, and a sudden revulsion of feeling seized her—a terrified sense of incongruity and unnaturalness and an immense desolation. She stood, as it were, the outcast thrust out by her wrongful love from the family bond; her maternal impulse recoiling upon herself and reacting in passionate revolt from ties which divided her very being against itself. And here by her side was the man she loved, gazing at her with a fervid yearning which would no longer be kept within the restraints she had imposed. All her resolve, her heroism of reserve, melted and vanished in the wild confusion of advancing flames, and of the alarm and excitement that surrounded them. They two seemed to stand alone, their world unharmed, while the conventional world was being destroyed before their eyes. A rafter fell, scattering burning fragments almost at their feet. He flung his arm about her and half dragged, half carried her across the tennis ground to a vine trellis some little distance off. Just then the bell at the workings again clanged out; there were hoarse shouts; another shaft of light shooting up down below the lagoon, and a cry repeated among the specials at the pumps: "The woolshed, the woolshed! By —— that's fired too!"

Clare clung to Geneste, trembling and sobbing, physically unnerved. She began to shiver, though the air was like the blast of a furnace, and he held her close, soothing her and warming her with his kisses.

"My dear, my darling! My poor, poor Clare!"

CHAPTER XXII.

"WE UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER."

It was a strange scene, that upon which the sun rose on the morning after the fire. The house was a wreck, the garden down-trampled and strewn with furniture, piles of bedding, and all kinds of miscellaneous properties; nothing remained of the woolshed but a blackened patch of ground and some heaps of ashes and charred timbers. Fortunately the night had been very still, and the buildings fairly isolated, so that the flames had not spread. Grimy and exhausted, the men dispersed at last to bathe in the water-hole and change their singed garments. The ladies had gone in the very early hours to the storekeeper's and overseer's cottages, where they lay down on sofas and spare beds, and by and by dressed and had some tea. Later on, though it was early still, when they were again in the garden of the house—now no more—sorting out their respective belongings, Helen Cusack was interrupted by Geneste.

"I wanted to propose a plan to you," he said. "I have been talking about it to Mrs. Tregaskiss. Why should you not all come with me to my place to-day and rest there while your father and brothers see after things here, and the unionist scare goes over a bit? Even if Mrs. Cusack wanted to remain,—and she says she must be on the spot,—why should not you come along with the Tregaskiss' and Mrs. Hilditch."

"No, no!" she exclaimed, with what, for Helen, was almost rude abruptness; "I should prefer to stay with my mother."

"You have often promised to come," he urged; "and you can do no good here. This seems such a good opportunity. It would be such a pleasure to have you for my visitor."

"No; I should hate it!" she said, in the same jerky tone. "Please don't ask me."

He desisted from persuasion, and silently watched her as she gathered some books together and tied them into a bundle. But when she tried to lift the bundle, her hands trembled so that the books fell, scattered. He picked them up and took the bundle from her; and, as she thanked him, she lifted her face for the first time. She looked so worn and upset that he was genuinely concerned. He insisted upon her drinking some port wine which Mrs. Cusack had given him to administer to the ladies, then upon her going with him out of the steamy sun, and took her to the shelter of that very trellis which had been the scene of his own and Clare's fall from their stronghold of reserve.

Helen shrank visibly, pausing at the entrance. "Oh, no, not there!" she said.

He noticed her shrinking and the slight shudder with which she turned away, noticed also that she reddened painfully when she spoke to him, and that she avoided meeting his eyes, as though there were some painful consciousness in her mind concerning him. Her manner had been a little strange of late, distant and embarrassed; and this, the evening before, had been more noticeable than usual. A thought flashed across him. Was it possible that she had witnessed that reckless exhibition of feeling in the arbour? If so, he could not be surprised that her maidenly instinct of propriety had been outraged, as well as a sentiment dearer still.

"Why do you not want to go in there?" he asked.

She did not answer, but moved instead to another creeper-covered summer-house overlooking the tennis court, a spot where they often had tea.

"Why?" he persisted.

"I don't know. I can't tell you. I wasn't thinking of what I was doing." Her voice was so full of trouble, her confusion and repugnance were so evident, that his suspicion was confirmed. "Please don't trouble about me," she went on; "I am quite well. Please go and look after the others."

"Not till I have cleared up something with you first. I think I know what you are thinking. Helen," he said very gently, "we have been such good friends, and we decided to be always the friends, didn't we, that we were? Yet you seem to me to have avoided speaking to me, as if you disapproved of me, these last few times that we have met; and now your manner makes me fancy, somehow, that I have done something quite lately to lower me still more in your esteem. Tell me, frankly, if this is so."

"Yes," she answered boldly, her face crimsoning again, and then getting very pale. Presently she cried impetuously: "It's because we have been such friends. Only—it is not a thing for me to speak about. But I can't see and hear things—though it's without intention, and not—not——"

"I understand," he interrupted quietly. "Last night I was betrayed into the expression of—a feeling which I—to which I had been forbidden to give utterance. And you became aware of—that feeling."

"Forbidden!" she exclaimed.

"Mine was the fault entirely—from the very first. She is the very best, truest, most loyal woman; she has been sorely tried. Do you not believe this?"

"Of course I believe that she is good. I am very sorry for her. But it's so terrible to—to love a woman who is married."

"Yes," he assented sadly; "it is very terrible—especially when her marriage is a miserable one, for then it is so hard to keep silence. I am to blame. I ought to have obeyed

her solemn command. But the circumstances, the fire, the confusion, are my excuse. A man's emotions are not always under his control." Helen's lip curled slightly. "Oh, yes! I know what you are thinking. If I had not been—— I have no excuse; you are quite right. But, oh, Helen, do you remember something you said to me that first night Mrs. Tregaskiss and I were here together?"

"I remember—several things. But there is no use in our reminding each other of that night."

"I want to remind you of one thing in especial, however. Please let me. You asked me, then, to promise you that I would tell you if ever there should be a Guinevere. And you said,—I have thought of your words many times, dear Helen, dear sister Helen, who is only less dear to me than one woman in the world,—you said that in such a case you could only pray for us. Pray for us, then, Helen; pray for her—that, somehow, good may come into her life, and make it less bitter. The prayer of a pure, true woman for another woman, in need of comfort, should be a force in the spiritual region of things."

The vibration of deep feeling in his voice moved her intensely, and in a strange and sudden way changed her moral attitude toward him. A moment before she had despised him. He was but a sorry hero. Helen was clear-sighted, in spite of the romantic infatuation with which Geneste had inspired her. At this moment there seemed to her almost pathos in his want of self-control. But women have a knack of loving most the men who, under certain emotional conditions, prove themselves to be poor creatures. They have a grand power, too, of reconstructing their ideal in accordance with masculine weakness and perversity.

She looked straight into his eyes; it was her tribute to his sincerity and to a certain right of intention in which she intended to believe. So, at any rate, he interpreted the look.

"Thank you," he said humbly.

"What do you wish me to pray for?" she asked. "What can I pray for that would be for her good, unless it be that you may leave her and that she may be delivered from an affection that is wrong?"

"Have you no faith in a loyal love-friendship? Do you not trust me?"

"Oh, I don't know! How can I tell? Yes, I trust you. I don't feel as I did a little while ago; it was so dreadful, thinking it over alone, and all in the dark. But how can I tell? Dr. Geneste, you ask too hard things of me."

"I will ask of you nothing, then, except only that you will try as much as you can to believe in me. I don't ask you to believe in her. It would be impossible for you not to do so; she has all nobleness written on her face. I have respected her wishes, her sense of duty to her children, to her position, and have done my best to refrain from expression of a feeling that has grown in spite of myself. But sometimes it is difficult. Last night, in the alarm and in her natural agitation, I lost command over myself. But that will never occur again. And why should I leave her if I am strong enough not to offend? No one could blame me for trying to give such help as I may, in her most unhappy life, such sympathy as will make her feel her loneliness less keenly. Believe that I honour and care for her too much to wish anything except what is best for her."

He was conscious himself that the words were evasive of the issue, though he meant them honestly enough. She accepted them, as a young, noble-minded girl naturally would accept such an assurance, and put out her hand with a gesture at once of appeal and confidence.

"Yes, I will believe that. And I *will* pray for you, Dr. Geneste, though I am not good or religious, that my prayers would avail anything. Now I have told you, I will try to put out of my head what I saw last night, and

at first felt about it. It was the shock and something—something Miss Lawford once said. I am ashamed of myself for having felt as I did."

"Thank you," he said again, but he did not look at her.

"I want to say something to you," Helen went on, in a hurried manner. "I don't wonder at your caring for her. How could you help it; she is so far above everybody, so different from the others—so different from me." Helen gave a pathetic little smile. "It was just that at first it was a shock; now I understand. I crept away and cried—and cried. For the moment it was like having one's faith destroyed. And I thought of how you had once—once—kissed me." Helen's voice dropped as though she were touching on something sacred, and then there came a thrill of passion into it. "Dr. Geneste, you oughtn't to have done it! You ought to have remembered that I was not a child any longer, and that I might mistake——" She broke off and turned away.

"I know that I ought not to have done it," he answered. "If you could but realise how the remembrance distresses and humiliates me—how unworthy I have felt myself of your goodness to me since. You remember what we talked of—how that closest of all feelings can exist at its best only between a man and woman nearer each other in age than you and I. You will have quite a different feeling when your right life-companion comes along. And yet I can't help hoping and thinking that though you may have the very greatest affection for someone else, you will not have a less affection for me. That will prove the truth of what I now say."

"I shall never at any time have a less affection for you," she answered steadily; "but I shall never at any time have a greater affection for any other man. Dr. Geneste, I don't know why I shouldn't speak out—especially now, though I dare say it would seem dreadful to most people, and they would be horrified at my boldness. I can't help

it. I don't seem able to feel about what is true and real—as real as I myself—in the sort of way that is described in books, and that girls are generally supposed to feel. I think it is poor and petty to be always guarding one's self and pretending. I *want* you to know that you will always be the first in the world to me, and if the day should ever come in which you were to say to me: 'Helen, I don't love you as I have loved another woman, whom I can't marry, but you can be of use to me as my little sister, my companion, my servant—will you be either of these to me and give up your life for that and teach me to forget?' Well,"—she made a movement full of womanly sweetness and pride, and her whole face glowed,—"I should answer that I would ask no greater happiness than to devote my life to being of service to you."

As he looked at her in all her girlish prettiness, he felt that fate had indeed been lavish in her bounty, and that were there no Clare Tregaskiss he might be well content to take the worship of this fine, trusting creature, and devote the rest of his life to making her happy.

"Who knows, Helen," he almost groaned, "who knows that such a day may not come, and then I shall remind you of your words and claim their fulfilment?"

"Well, we understand each other," she answered simply. "I am not afraid because I've put myself in the wrong position and made myself into a sort of door-mat for you to walk on. I suppose that's my only way of caring—though it may be rather a contemptible one."

"My dear!" he cried; "it's a sublime way of caring, and it's just what makes me know that you'll care differently some day."

"Oh, well, we won't argue about that; it doesn't matter. There's only one thing I wouldn't do for you; and that is something that I knew to be wrong. No, I'm not a bit ashamed of myself. It's all quite beyond that kind of consideration. And then I know you understand.

No one but you could understand—and Mrs. Tregaskiss. I dare say she would know how I feel."

"Yes; she would know."

"You may tell her, if you please, all that I have said to you. I shouldn't mind. It might make her more—perhaps more contented with her lot. Sometimes I think that I shall tell her myself, but she always seems so far away, and so cold."

"She is not cold; she is only unhappy."

"I know that. Dr. Geneste, tell me, did you have a longing to tear off that still, smooth marble covering, and get at the real woman who was bleeding underneath? Was it that which made you care?"

"Yes," he answered, in a low voice. "And last night I did see the bleeding woman; and my heart ached for her, and I wanted to comfort her. Now, do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand."

Then he laughed outright. There was to him a touch of comicality in his position between these two woman, who were, both of them, he acknowledged to himself, in their strength so immeasurably above him. And Helen's generosity, her splendid candour, seemed to lift the situation into a sort of sublime farce.

"Will you come over to Darra?" he asked abruptly. "Don't, if you would rather not. But I don't see why you should, and it would prove at least that you believe in me."

Helen showed that she was human, in that she winced again at the suggestion.

"I don't know. There's so much to do here. We'll see what mother says."

Young Gillespie came upon the scene. He was almost turning back at the sight of Dr. Geneste with Helen, but changed his mind.

"Miss Cusack, I've been hunting for you. They want you to come and choose your room in the bachelors' quar-

ters. I've fixed up the books and pictures, and things in the one I've been having myself. I think you'd like it; there's a window looking on the garden!"

"Poor you!" said Helen, smiling bravely; "and where are you going?"

"Oh, to the overseer's! No, Geneste has asked me to camp at Darra for a bit, and I've accepted his invitation."

"It seems to me that we're all going to camp at Darra," said Helen.

"Miss Lawford and Minnie are going, anyhow," said Gillespie. "I heard it settled with Mrs. Cusack. I'm to drive them over this afternoon; and Tregaskiss wants to start at the same time, so as to get the cool of the evening. He's in an awful fume about his buggy horses doing two long stages running. He says going by the Carmody's will make too long a round."

Geneste had suggested a slight detour by way of the Carmody's, so that Clare might pay the visit they had spoken about, and he himself have an opportunity of quietly noting how poor Mrs. Carmody was getting on.

"Oh, it's all right! I will go and talk to him about it," said Geneste.

They walked to what had once been the back entrance, where Tregaskiss' buggy was standing, and he himself worrying among the saddle-bags, Gladys' portmanteau, salvage from the fire, and the other miscellaneous packages.

"These poor brutes will be regularly cooked if I make that round," he was saying. "I've sent Shand back to Mount Wombo, and shall have to drive the buggy myself—and I'm pretty considerably heavier than Shand. I don't know how I'm going to manage all these things, and Clare and the children and half-caste into the bargain."

"You need not take such a load," said Geneste quietly. "I've got a spare pack-horse, and my black boy can drive it with some of your things. Mrs. Hilditch is riding, and I don't see at all why, if Mrs. Tregaskiss liked, we shouldn't

carry out part of the original plan, anyhow, and we riders go round by the Carmodys'. If we start pretty soon, we shall get there for a late breakfast. I'm particularly anxious to see Mrs. Carmody. I hear she is not so well, and I know she wants to meet your wife, who might be a comfort to her. If we settle it so, you needn't set off till the afternoon when the rest go from here."

The plan suited Tregaskiss very well. He could thus put some of his own baggage in the Brinda Plains buggy and save his horses, and, moreover, he would have the opportunity of driving Miss Lawford. He assented eagerly. But when Geneste approached Mrs. Hilditch with the proposal, she declined.

"Three is a bad number, and I don't know Mrs. Carmody, and if she is sick, she won't want to know me. No, I think I'll let you have Clare to yourself, Dr. Geneste, and I'll wait till the afternoon."

Gladys was not herself. She looked quite worn out, there were two red spots on her cheeks, though otherwise she was very pale, and her eyes had an alert, anxious expression. She was wondering what had become of Blanchard, whom she had not seen since his deliverance of her from the burning room. A sudden shyness kept her from asking about him, and she waited on, in the hope that he might appear toward the afternoon.

Thus it happened that, about nine that morning, Mrs. Tregaskiss and Geneste found themselves riding alone to the Carmodys' station.

An odd little incident had happened just before their start. Clare was in the spare room at the overseer's, putting on her habit, when a knock sounded at the door, and Helen Cusack asked if he might come in.

"Certainly," said Mrs. Tregaskiss.

"Mother asked if you would mind taking charge of these," Helen said awkwardly, producing a small packet. "It's some Iceland moss, and there's a bottle of Mr.

Gillespie's tasteless cod-liver oil. He doesn't need them now, and mother thought they might help Mrs. Carmody, if you don't mind."

"Why, of course not! I can quite easily manage a bigger parcel; there are dees for a valise on the off side of my saddle."

"I think that's all," said Helen. Clare put on her hat and arranged her veil. "It seems strange," said Helen deliberately, but with a break in her voice, "that we should all be going over to stay with Dr. Geneste."

"Yes." The still woman's hand trembled as she put the pin in her veil. "You are going, then?"

"He asked me. Mother thinks I'd better, as Miss Lawford is to be there. He says she can teach the children just the same, and there's not a quiet place here. He doesn't want us to come back till they are settled in the bachelors' quarters. Mother will have a lot to do."

"It is a good plan," said Clare. "I wish I could persuade you to come on to Mount Wombo with us. It wouldn't be quite so dull, now that we have Mrs. Hilditch."

"I shouldn't mind how dull it was. I'd like to come."

"Then come, my dear," said Mrs. Tregaskiss, turning round to her from the glass.

She was surprised at the expression upon the girl's face. It seemed to her an accusation against herself of disloyalty. "Helen!" she exclaimed, dropping the gloves and whip she had taken from the table.

"Mrs. Tregaskiss," Helen said hurriedly, "I want to tell you something. I feel mean not to tell you. But I don't see how I can, somehow. Dr. Geneste knows. Will you ask him to tell you what we were talking about this morning?"

Clare stood silent for a minute before answering, her brown eyes searching the girl's face.

"Do you think I had better ask him?" she said slowly. "There are many things which it is far wiser to leave

unsaid. And," she added, "there are things which it is difficult for a very young girl, with her limited knowledge, to judge justly. We learn, as we grow older and suffer more, that silence is generally the truest sympathy."

"You must do as you please," answered Helen, in a choked tone, and hurried from the room.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"JUST A MAN!"

GENESTE and Clare had ridden almost in silence for some miles. The heat was very great, though the sun was not yet high, and he could not see her face, swathed as it was in her gray veil. She was riding a horse of his, one he had brought with an ulterior view to rides with her, and while they were on the plain he mainly occupied himself in pacing the animal. But by and by they got into the gidia scrub, where there was less glare.

"I wish you would put up your veil," he said. "I know you are above small vanities; and, besides, I know, too, that yours is the sort of skin which doesn't sunburn easily."

She did as he wished; and then he fancied that under the shelter of her veil she had been crying.

"Don't be sad," he said, in that caressing voice which was his greatest charm with women. "We have got a long day before us, and a delightful ride in the dusk to Darra. Let us try to forget that there is anything in the world to make us unhappy."

She took no notice of the appeal.

"I want you to confess something truly to me," she said seriously. "You need not be afraid that I shall be jealous or hurt. Perhaps I am above those small vanities, too. Tell me, did you ever really give Helen Cusack cause to think that you cared for her?"

"Frankly," he replied, "if it hadn't been for that meeting with you at Cedar Hill, and the revelation you gave me of your real self the night we camped by The Grave,

I think it is more than likely I might now be engaged to Helen Cusack. Do you utterly despise me?"

"No; why should I? It is what I supposed. But you have not quite truly answered my question."

Geneste hesitated. "There are things," he said, "that a man doesn't readily tell, even to the woman he loves best and trusts most: not so much because they show him in a bad light as because they concern another woman."

"Helen came to my room this morning and begged me to ask you to tell me what you and she had been saying to each other this morning. Does that meet your objection?"

"Did she—really? The girl is extraordinary; she is tremendous; she is sublime! Yes, she said that I might tell you, or that she would tell you herself; but I did not think she meant it. Clare, I am a beast, an idiot, or perhaps it would be more to the point to say that I am a man!"

"Yes," she answered, with a melancholy smile; and, for the first time applied to himself, he heard a faint intonation of scorn in her voice. "Men never seem to rise, after all, to being much more than men. Well, tell me."

Then he told her the whole story from the beginning of his attraction toward Helen—the kiss, the revulsion, the compact of friendship, all—up to their strange talk of that morning.

"If I were as noble as she is," said Clare, "I should resolve never to see you again. Then you would in time forget me, and you would, of course, care for her, and you would be very happy."

"Do you think that is possible, after having loved you?" He laughed again, almost as he had laughed to Helen. "The whole thing is whimsical; it's ridiculous!"

"It is cruel!" exclaimed Clare bitterly.

"Ah, you don't seem to see what is so clear to me, that

just this wonderful magnanimity and candour proves her utter incomprehension of love—as we know it. Her feeling for me, poor child !—and Heaven knows how unworthy I am of it—is a poem, a dream, much the sort of thing that makes a certain type of Roman Catholic girl want to be a nun; it's not flesh and blood, and the wound doesn't bleed. That's my consolation, and that reconciles me to the position I've put myself into, which would be humiliating enough to one's self in the ordinary way."

"Do you remember saying to me that night at The Grave that Helen Cusack was one of the women who would know the real thing when it came along ?" she asked.

"Yes, I remember. Well, the conception of me as a fatuous fool gets a further justification. Jove must have been in a curiously ironic mood when he portioned out to me such chances of happiness," he added, after a pause.

"Why do you call it ironic ?"

"There's something of the Tantalus touch about the business, don't you think ?" he said with bitterness. "My confession has not raised me in your estimation. I feel that in your whole manner."

"Perhaps. But I have wronged that poor girl. Besides," she added impetuously, "last night has made me realise again how impossible it all is."

"Clare, have mercy !"

"I have mercy—too much mercy on you. But I can have none on myself. The worst part of the whole thing is—to know you as—a man——"

"Neither saint nor hero," he interjected. "Be it so. I withdraw all pretensions to a superhuman virtue. Well, dear, beautiful, magnificent woman—and I can only wish you were still more woman——"

"Oh, don't, don't say that !"

"Why not ? it is true. But I will say nothing that you wish unsaid. Finish your sentence."

"Not now. Those words take the sap out of it."

"I insist. Go on! The worst part of the whole thing is—to know me—as just a man—and——"

"And to love you because you are yourself—just yourself—no better than I am; not so strong as even Ambrose Blanchard."

"You don't know the story of Ambrose Blanchard and Gladys Hilditch."

"I can guess it. He left her——"

"For the reason that he did not love her as well as I love you."

She made a gesture full of perplexity and pain. Geneste went on:

"Well, if he did show superhuman virtue,—putting your construction upon the matter,—he may have his reward now. The next month or two will show whether he chooses to claim it. But don't let us talk of Blanchard and Mrs. Hilditch; let us talk of ourselves. Do you know, my dearest, a moment ago I was wretched at the idea of having made you despise me? Now I am almost glad to have fallen from my pedestal—glad, since I heard those last words of yours. Down on earth, I'm nearer to you in one sense, anyhow, and as somebody says somewhere, pedestals are not comfortable places."

"Dr. Geneste," she said, looking at him with great earnestness, "I am quite serious in what I am going to ask you."

"Mrs. Tregaskiss," he rejoined, "I promise to give your question my most serious attention."

"Don't jest. I am too wretched to make jokes."

His whole manner changed.

"Clare, my dearest, don't you know that I am ridiculously, boyishly happy? And do you know why? Because you said that you loved me; loved me because I am just my own imperfect self—not a saint or a hero. I'm so delighted to get rid of my halo; it will become you far better. I'll put you on the pedestal now. I'll fall

down and worship you ; you need not be afraid that I shall fail in one iota of respect for you. Only, why keep up the farce of conventionalities, when there's no part to play, and we are out of earshot of every living creature ? You have never once called me by my name. Say it, Clare. I want to hear how it sounds from your lips."

"What is it ?" she asked perversely. "Yes, I know. Guy. Guy Geneste, Guy Livingstone ! Guy—— What was the good heir of Redclyffe called ? Guy ! I don't like it; it's only fit for a novel or the theatre. That's just it,—what I hate,—what makes me hate myself. Good women don't play parts, and it's true as you said. We have a part to play. But for goodness sake let us keep a spice of originality ! We needn't repeat the hackneyed business : 'Call me Edwin, dearest !'"

"Who is making jokes now ?"

She had turned her head away; he had known that it was to hide her quivering lips, even when she spoke so lightly. Now she looked at him full, and there was a scared expression in her eyes.

"I'm in deadly earnest; it has all come over me. I've been feeling it these weeks back. But last night, and in the dawn this morning, when I lay awake with baby beside me, and Ning and *he* were resting on the floor near me, I felt that I was a wicked woman, that I couldn't hold up my head and look straight into the light of day. I felt that way when Helen Cusack came into my room this morning, and I knew that she had found me out, and that she was having a battle with herself, so that she mightn't seem to be shrinking back from me. I felt that I must end it all ; that—last night must never come again ; it was the breaking of my vow. And that's what I mean. I am going to ask you never to come and see me at Mount Wombo again. Go to Brinda Plains instead, and see Helen Cusack. You can make some excuse ; you can get up a quarrel with my husband—that would be the best way."

"Clare, you don't really mean this—and if you do, can you imagine that it would be possible for either of us?"

"Everything is possible when one determines that it shall be so. You could marry Helen Cusack, and I could bear to see you her husband, if we had both made up our minds to it."

"Put that notion out of your head entirely," he said, with anger. "Perhaps you would have me take that poor Quixotic child at her word, and lay up a lifetime of misery for her as well as for myself—and for you. Do you think you would be any happier if you condemned me to be miserable?"

"I think," she answered slowly, "that we are condemning each other every time we meet to a worse misery than we could have any other way."

"Clare," he said reproachfully, "you have made me happier than I have ever been in all my life, and I had hoped that I was helping you a little. You said so in the beginning."

"Ah, in the beginning. But we don't seem able to keep at the beginning. It's all a mistake," she went on. "We thought that we were going to help each other; that we were going to make a new world for each other; that all the hard things were to become easier, and all the bad people better, because we loved each other."

"And isn't it so?" he asked tenderly. "The world is much better to me because of your love."

"You think so just now that we are together and alone. But did you not confess yesterday evening, when we were walking in the garden, that it was torture to be with me before other people—and wretchedness when we were apart?"

"Yes, that is true. But sometimes we are alone together; and five minutes of such happiness is worth a good deal of pain."

"And yet," she went on, "when we are alone together

you are often tormented by—by the limitations, which, oh, Heaven! are so easily overstepped."

"You have said it," he answered. "I am but human. And I love you."

"Oh, it is a mistake, a terrible mistake!" she cried passionately. "Our fine theories and our raptures, and all our resolves were only a sort of glamour to cover up the lie. That is what it is; that is what the world has changed to,—a lie. I am a lie to the neighbours, to myself, to my children, and to my husband. What does it matter whether he is bad or good? He is my husband; and till I knew you, I was true to him in every action of my life, even if I were false in the thoughts of my heart. Now I am false in heart and action too. I am false when I lie down, false when I rise up, false when I hear my little child say her prayers, and she repeats after me, 'God bless father and mother.' Guy, you are free; you have no other claims; you can live your life alone. But have you ever thought what it must mean to me—to go to sleep with one's name on my lips, the thought of one man only in my heart, and the longing that we may be together in my dreams. Then to wake with that one image in my mind; my dearest hope that he may come, or that I may have some word from him that day; to know that all my being is absorbed in him, and to know, too, that I am the wife of another man—who is the father of my children: to be living under that man's roof, eating his bread, wearing the clothes his money has bought me—never apart from him day or night?"

The words rushed out. She did not look at Geneste as she said them, and when she broke off, gave her horse a touch with the whip, and they cantered on for some time in silence. When they pulled up, he said very quietly:

"If you feel it so badly as that, my poor Clare, there are only two courses for us to choose from."

"Two!" she repeated feverishly.

"I must do what you say you wish—keep apart from you

altogether. The best plan would be for me to go away, as I have sometimes thought I might."

"Right away!"

"Yes. Sell Darra-Darra and go home and pick up my old life again."

He watched her face with an eagerness that was almost cruel, hoping that his words would wound her. He was gratified. She gave an involuntary murmur of pain.

"Right away!" she repeated. "Back to England! and I should stay out here alone on the Leura, desolate!"

"It is the only way, if I am to obey your wish. I cannot remain at Darra, within thirty miles of you, and not come to see you. It would be beyond my strength."

She made an heroic effort.

"Very well. I think you are right. Go! The other would certainly be difficult for a man—who is—just a man. Yes, you must go back to England."

They were both silent for a minute or two, riding on under the gidia trees. This noonday stillness seemed awful. Presently he said: "I told you there were two courses. You have never thought of the alternative?"

"No."

"It is a very simple one; I consider it a perfectly righteous one, according to all natural law. Many others of the world's thinkers—far better and wiser people than I—advocate it. Why should your whole life, and mine, be sacrificed to a mere chimera invented by man. The only real marriage is that of hearts and souls? Why should we be apart? Why should you remain here desolate? Why should you not come to England with me, and be my dearly cherished wife and companion, as long as our lives last?"

She drew a deep breath, which was like a gasp. "Because it is impossible," she answered. "How could I be your wife?"

"Tregaskiss would be only too ready to take his

freedom. There would be a divorce, and we should marry."

Again there was a silence. Then she said abruptly: "And my children?"

"They are his children. You have often said that you did not love your children as you ought, because they were his."

"I brought them into the world. I gave them life, poor little things! And they are girls, and will grow up to be women—perhaps women like their mother. And they will have no mother to help them to make a better thing of their life than she has done."

"You had no mother."

"If mine had lived, I might not have married Keith Tregaskiss!"

The dogs following them started a kangaroo, and Clare's horse, which was fresh, snorted and tried to follow. After a minute or two, it quieted down again.

"Clare," Geneste said, "I'm not going to talk heroics, or the kind of sentiment which, in novels, anyhow, goes with the proposal I've made. I only want you to know that I meant it, and that my life is yours, as long as it, or your own, lasts. If it is to be a question between me and the children, just look at the matter this way, too: When your children are grown, they will leave you, and their interests will be apart from yours, and you will be desolate indeed. Your children are your fetters. Well, in nine or ten years, when you are still comparatively a young women, nature will release you from them—unless you go on forging new fetters, as you may do."

He spoke deliberately; she gave a shudder.

"It would be sacrificing a lifetime for a very few years. How shall you feel, when those years are over, if you send me away now? Of course, there is the chance of freedom coming in a different way."

"Don't!" she interrupted hastily. "Don't speak of that! I am not so bad as to speculate on death or evil."

"I won't say any more ; and there is the Carmodys' fence. We needn't talk of it; only let the idea dwell in your mind, and shape itself—as a possibility."

"No, no!" she cried ; "you must not even think of such a possibility. It is not a possibility; it is absolutely out of the question."

"Do you wish me then to go away? I will obey you, if you command it."

"Not yet. Let us give ourselves a chance of becoming sensible." She smiled a miserable smile, which contradicted the suggestion. "Do what I ask you ; keep away from me, at least for a time."

"Very well. I will try to do so ; I cannot promise you that I shall succeed."

He got off his horse as he spoke, to let down the slip-rails of the Carmodys' paddock fence. She passed through ; and then he put them up again, and they cantered toward the head-station.

Gunna-Warra, as the place was called, looked ill-conditioned and poverty-stricken ; and it was easy to see that as few hands as possible were employed in its workings. The fences were out of repair, the lower part of the garden a wilderness, and the trees which had been "rung," and some of which were felled, had been left still to cumber the ground. The gidia scrub which surrounded it added to its melancholy appearance. The house, like most station houses, stood upon a slight rise, at the foot of which was a creek, broadening here into several stagnant lily-grown lagoons ; the entrance was at the back.

It had been "killing morning," and a flock of crows and hawks were hanging about the stock-yard, not far off, and making swoops down toward the meat-store veranda, where Mr. Carmody, with his shirt-sleeves tucked up, was salting meat, assisted by a couple of black boys. A tall, prematurely aged girl of eleven or twelve, had just taken away a tin dish full of unappetising morsels to fry for

breakfast, which was very late that day ; some other children were playing about the yard, and several black gins were squatted on their hams, nursing pickaninnies and smoking clay pipes, the reward for assistance in carrying down the "cut-up" beast, and there were sundry dogs of the kangaroo and a sort of pariah breed sniffing round. Mr. Carmody came forward, pulling down his shirt-sleeves, and greeted them with subdued geniality. He was a long, thin, disjointed-looking bushman, weather-beaten, unkempt, and with a worried expression. He apologised to Mrs. Tregaskiss—she knew what "killing" morning meant, when there weren't many hands going, and he and the black boys had to do the salting between them ; but it was pretty near finished, and he'd go up and get the cows milked so as to have some fresh milk for breakfast—only two of 'em, Mrs. Tregaskiss ; this drought is drying up all the milkers.

"You get on," said Geneste, "and finish up your salting. I'll go and milk the cows. We've come upon you unawares ; but I'm taking Mrs. Tregaskiss over to Darra,—her husband is with the buggy, and is going by the short-cut,—and we both thought it was a good chance of seeing Mrs. Carmody."

"Well, I'm glad you've come, doctor, though we laughed at your doctoring last time you were over. The missis isn't just the thing. First time since I don't know when. Said she felt lazy this morning, and she hasn't got up yet."

Geneste looked grave.

"How has Mrs. Carmody been feeling?" he asked.

"Well, I don't rightly know. Says there's a sort of numbness down one side of her, and that she couldn't rightly swallow. And she's been having that stupid little cough a good deal, and the pain in her chest."

Geneste's face became graver still.

"You'll let me have a look at her to-day, and see what that pain in her chest means?" he said.

"That's what I want, doctor. I don't believe it's any-

thing, for it goes, and she's all right again. Why, she says herself, if it wasn't for that pain and the sort of chokiness, she'd be the strongest and cheerfullest woman on the Leura. Cheerfullest, she is, anyhow," added Mr. Carmody, with his perplexed little laugh; "and it isn't a bit like her to give in, though it is only once in a way, and there can't be much amiss, for she was laughing like anything a bit ago. But I think I'd just like you to go in and see her before you start on again."

"Certainly. Shall I go now, or milk the cow first?"

"Well, if you didn't mind—the missis always has her glass of fresh milk and dash of rum and egg about ten or eleven o'clock; and we're awfully behind this morning. Mrs. Tregaskiss, don't you bother about that pack," as Clare was unfastening the package from the dees of her saddle. "Things for my wife, is it? Well, that's real kind of Mrs. Cusack. Hi, Black Billy, there! you take it yarraman, belonging Mrs. Tregaskiss. And how's all at Brinda?"

"I suppose you don't know that we were all burned out last night?" said Clare. And then amid many ejaculations on the part of Mr. Carmody, and of the child with the dish of meat, who had stopped to listen, she told the story. Geneste, in the meanwhile, unsaddling and leading the horses to the yard, and then going to the milkers. Mr. Carmody, wiping the salt from his hands, led Mrs. Tregaskiss into a roughly furnished sitting-room, which had, somehow, a forlorn look, as if the mistress had not put things straight that morning—the kerosene lamp untrimmed, and with a black rim round its bowl of dead flying ants and moths, and Mrs. Carmody's basket of mendings on the sewing-machine stand, a half-darned sock hanging out of it.

"We're in a dreadful muck this morning," said Mr. Carmody. "The missis does the tidying—always up first thing, and doing her lamps and cleaning round. Ah, Mrs.

Tregaskiss! when I see her at it, and think of what she was when I married her, one of the prettiest girls down Sydney way, and used to gaiety and comforts, and English ways like the best of them,—not but what you are an example of that, too,—I say to myself that a man has no right to bring a woman out West, unless he's a company's manager, like Cusack, or a millionaire like Cyrus Chance."

Clare, following Geneste's lead, put the room tidy, and talked to the children, while Carmody went in to prepare his wife for her visitor. By and by he came out and told Clare she might go in, and she'd find Mrs. Carmody quite herself, and wanting to get up and see after things; but she, Mrs. Tregaskiss, mustn't let her. And he scurried off, enjoining the eldest girl to hurry up in the kitchen.

"Come in, Mrs. Tregaskiss," said a faint, laughing voice, as Clare knocked at the door. Mrs. Carmody's room looked more dainty and comfortable than the rest of the house, though the floor was only of earth, covered with skins and rugs, and it had no glass windows, only wooden shutters; but there were pictures hanging on the canvas walls, and the dressing-table was covered with chintz, and there were some cushioned squatters' chairs, and a writing table. Mrs. Carmody was lying in the big bed, supported by pillows, with the mosquito-curtains thrown up, the pink glazed calico bows dangling at the head making a spot of colour, and matching Mrs. Carmody's cheeks, flushed with the exertion of getting into a fresh, frilled nightdress. There was, to Clare, something intensely pathetic in this effort of the poor dying woman to be equal to the occasion, for she was dying, there could be no doubt of that, and for a moment Mrs. Tregaskiss' heart stood still with the shock of dismay. But the little pretty thing—though she was thirty-five, she looked extraordinarily young and charming with her fluffy yellow hair, bright eyes, and spiritualised expression—laughed on:

"It's quite absurd for me to be in bed. But this morning I really felt so tired, and I said to Jem that I thought I'd just take it easy for a bit, and have the little ones in with me here and amuse them while Jenny was doing my work. Jem says I'd better see Dr. Geneste as he has come over, but I don't see the use, for there's nothing the matter; except just that I feel queer and numb-like, and this troublesome pain in my chest that comes and goes, and seems to choke me for the moment."

Clare noticed that her voice changed oddly as she talked; and then her cough hindered her utterance and she leaned back and gulped as though she were being strangled. The attack went off in a minute or two and she gasped, with a smile:

"There, it's gone now! I'm all right again. I dare say Dr. Geneste will tell me of something for it; and I shall be quite well to-morrow."

"I think you had better see him, dear Mrs. Carmody," said Clare, afraid that her faltering voice might betray her, for she felt extremely anxious.

"Oh, well, I will then, after you've had breakfast and they've brought me my 'doctor,' as Jem calls the twelve o'clock rum and milk. Are your cows dying, Mrs. Tregaskiss, and drying up, too, from the drought? It's quite dreadful with us; we can hardly get enough for the babies," and so on; and Clare sat by her and listened and assented and told about the fire and praised the looks of the babies, till at last Mr. Carmody, in a clean shirt and coat, and with cleansed hands and arms, pushed open the door and cheerily ushered in Dr. Geneste.

"All right, doctor! you can have your way at last, and overhaul the old lady, but don't you go telling me there's anything amiss, for that colour of hers will give you the lie, and I shan't believe you. You doctors always want to make out a case."

CHAPTER XXIV.

POOR MRS. CARMODY.

The doctor seemed to be a very long time with the sick woman. When he came out, there was a look upon his face which Mrs. Tregaskiss hoped she might never see again. It was strange how, in a moment, he had become an abstraction removed from all personal stress and excitement; not the man, but the physician; a reflection, as it were, of those mighty human interests beside which individual emotions sink into nothingness. Clare felt something of this, too. Her drama and his were absorbed in and annihilated by the thrilling drama of death into which they had been suddenly and startlingly thrown. It was terrible to see Mr. Carmody's unconcern, and absolute unconsciousness of impending catastrophe. He sat with Clare in the sitting-room, waiting for the doctor, the breakfast table spread, and talked about the Brinda Plains fire, the unionists, the drought, Tregaskiss' bores, never suspecting that his own fate and that of his dearest hung upon the examination going on within that closed door.

"Well, doctor," he said cheerily, when Geneste appeared, "is she going to get up? Have you given her a good scolding for her laziness? Eh! Man! What—what is the matter?"

Geneste went straight to him.

"Carmody," he said, in a low voice, deeply moved, "there's no good in blinking things to you, anyhow; I've got to break bad news. You've heaps of pluck, old fellow, and you'll want it. You've got to bear a shock—the worst a man can have to bear."

"Eh! What—what do you mean?" stammered Carmody, frightened and taken aback by Geneste's manner.

"Your wife is very ill indeed. Very, very ill. Do you understand?" Carmody was staring stupidly. "She has been bad for a long time; and neither of you have realised it. Now I am sorry to have to tell you that there is no—there is very great danger."

"Danger," repeated Carmody, still blankly.

"Very great danger—imminent danger."

"But what do you mean, man?" roared Carmody. "Why, she was laughing at me a minute ago! Danger! You must be dreaming; you don't know what you are talking about."

"I wish that I did not. Look here, Carmody; I've got to make it clear to you. I wish to God I could give you any hope, but I can't."

"Can't—give—me—any—hope!" repeated poor Carmody, with a jerk between each word, while he gazed fixedly at the doctor, as though he were fascinated by some horrible sight. Then, "Will you please to tell me," he cried almost angrily, "what is the matter with my Bessy?"

"Your wife has an aortic aneurism," replied Geneste. "The pain in her chest, which I felt sure could not mean lung mischief, and the little choking cough, and other symptoms, have made me afraid of late months that it might be the case, though the disease is not common with women, especially when comparatively young. That is what made me hesitate to speak of my suspicion; and you wouldn't hear of my approaching Mrs. Carmody medically. Now, since I have examined her chest, and have felt the pulsating swelling, I have no doubt; and I don't know what to say to you or how to advise you about—about"—Geneste's own voice broke—"conveying to her that she may not have long to live."

"Geneste! Doctor! you don't mean—you can't mean that she is dying?"

"I am afraid," said Geneste, in a low emphatic voice, which shook with pity, "that I must tell you she may die at any moment; she may live a week, a fortnight; she may die within the next half hour."

Carmody burst into an hysterical laugh. "And you want me to tell her she is dying! Do you expect me to believe it? You don't know your business, doctor; you're deceived, you're out of practice."

"Do you think I'd say a thing like that to you if I wasn't sure. Go in, Carmody, put her in a sitting position, and you'll believe me then. I know it's an awful blow. I'm only doing my duty in telling you straight. Go in—there's not much time. Try to be calm. Talk to her. You know her and you know what she would wish, and if she would willingly leave her children—and you, without a word."

Mr. Carmody sank helplessly upon a chair. "You want me to tell her—that she is dying; tell her—my poor little Bessy, who was planning only last night how we'd take a trip to Sydney when the bad times were over, and put Jennie to school,—my Bessy—the pluckiest, cheeriest—— Tell her she is dying! No, I'm d——d if I can do that!"

He broke down altogether, and lurching forward, his head on his arms, cried out like a child.

A voice came from the sick room: "Jem!" The door was thin and there were wide canvas-covered gaps between the slabs of the wall. The poor woman must have heard that despairing cry. "What is it he says he can't do?" the feeble voice went on; and just then the two little children, who had run in from the veranda to their mother as soon as the doctor had left her, set up a wail. Geneste looked at Clare.

"Will you go to her? I will do what I can with him, poor chap!"

Just then Jennie, the eldest girl, came in, followed by a half-caste with the dish of smoking fry. "It's ready,

father," she said. "Shall I take some in to mother?" And then she stood still, her gaze fixed in consternation upon the father, who was sobbing with his head on the luncheon table. Clare took her hand.

"Jennie, dear," she whispered, "come and take the children away. The doctor has been telling your father that your mother is very ill, and he wants to talk to her."

"Oh, Mrs. Tregaskiss!" The child's eyes grew rounder, but she said no more. She was a wise little creature, and went in with Clare to her mother's room and took out the babies, who were fighting with each other and crying on the floor.

Mrs. Carmody was half sitting up in bed. Something of that look which nurses call "the change" had come into her face; the laugh had gone, and the smile had given place to an expression of terror.

"Take them away, Jennie, out into the veranda; perhaps I shall want them presently. Mrs. Tregaskiss," she gasped, "tell me—what is it. What has the doctor been saying to Jem? Has he been telling him that I shall never get better? Tell me—you needn't be afraid. I heard him say the word—dying, and I saw it in his face. Am I dying?"

Clare's only answer was to take the poor thing in her arms and to put the wan face, with all the pink gone out of it now, against her own.

"I feel so strange," said Mrs. Carmody. "Lay me down again." She was perfectly calm. After a few minutes she said: "Poor Jem! That was him crying. I'm so glad I've been a comfort to him." There was a little pause, filled by Clare in arranging the poor thing more comfortably on her pile of pillows. There were no medicines, there was nothing to give her; it seemed so unlike most sick rooms, when the sick person is in extremity. "Mrs. Tregaskiss,"—the bright eyes searched Clare's face through and through, with, as Clare thought later, that sort of prescience which comes sometimes to the dying—

"listen! I want to say something to you. Once I was nearly leaving Jem and the babies, and going off with another man, because I loved him, and he was rich, and I hated the bush. But I didn't, and I am so thankful, now I'm dying, that I didn't. Do you know, it's the first thought that seems to come to me. Oh, it's such a comfort when you're dying to know that you've managed to keep straight, and that you've looked after the children the best way you could."

Clare went out. The words were like insistent hands knocking at her heart. Poor Mr. Carmody met her, groping his way, it appeared, his eyes nearly blinded with crying. He went in and closed the door. Clare heard a plaintive call, "Jem!" and then only a stifled murmur as the husband and wife held their last talk together.

Geneste was sitting in the parlour, waiting till he should be wanted again. There was something terribly grim in the look of the spread table, the untasted luncheon, and the dish of fry getting cold and sodden. Clare exchanged a few hurried words with Geneste about Mrs. Carmody's condition, and he confirmed her fear that the end was very close. His solicitude on her own behalf jarred inexpressibly upon Clare; she waved away with impatience his entreaty that she would eat something, or at least have a drink of the fresh milk from which Mrs. Carmody's "doctor" had been taken.

"No, no!" she cried, almost angrily. "How can I eat? How can I think of anything but——"

But—— She hurried away from him. What she was thinking of was that speech of Mrs. Carmody's. "It's such a comfort when you're dying to know that you've managed to keep straight, and that you've looked after the children the best way you could."

In the veranda Jennie was nursing the youngest child, crying softly on its hair, the two next smallest whining and squabbling at her knee.

"Oh, hush, Jake and Kathleen, hush!" cried poor Jennie. "I can't tell you a story. They want me to tell them a story, Mrs. Tregaskiss. Mother was telling them stories when——" And Jennie's tears fell.

"Mother's stories are beautiful," said Jake; "all about the people who lived with gods and goddesses and got changed into things."

"I will tell you a story, then, about someone who lived with the gods and goddesses, and whom a wicked goddess tried to change into a pig. It's the story of a king who went sailing and sailing, and got on to strange countries and among very curious people."

"Oh, I know that," put in Jake contemptuously. "It's only Sinbad and the Old Man of the Sea. There are no gods in that."

"You don't know my story. It wasn't Sinbad; it was a king, very brave and wise, who went a long, long way from his wife and his son to fight for his friend. And when the war was over, after many years, Ulysses—that was the king's name—took his ships and started to go home. Well, on his way back there was a storm, and the ships were brought to a land where there lived a very wicked and beautiful woman, and she sat spinning in her palace, a web of the most brilliant colours, and watching for some man to come along, that she might pretend to love him and give him to drink of her cup of witch's wine, in which she had mixed all kinds of dreadful herbs and enchantments, so that, when he had drunk, he would forget everything and she would have power to change him into some horrible beast."

"That's a good story," put in Jake appreciatively.

"And outside her palace were wild beasts watching, too, while she wove her web. There was a leopard——"

The bedroom door opened with a sharp click, and Mr. Carmody came out. He made a sign to Dr. Geneste to go in, and then called quietly to Jennie and the little ones.

He told Jennie to go and find her brothers, and bring them, because their mother wanted to speak to them all ; and then, taking the two little ones by the hand, bade them be very good and listen attentively to what mother said.

Clare waited in the veranda. Afterward Geneste told her how it had been ; how Mrs. Carmody had kissed each of them, and had told each separately to try and be good and to love the others, and that, though she was going out of their sight, she should always be near watching to see if they obeyed her, and that it would make "mother" very glad and happy to know that they were good. She bade Jennie, in especial, to take care of her father and the little ones, and she bade the boys to tell the truth always, and to follow their father in all things. Then, just as she was trying to lift herself that she might kiss the baby again, she fell back, and when they looked at her she was dead.

Geneste rode on to Darra, before he went sending one of the Gunna-Warra black boys to Brinda Plains with a note to Mrs. Cusack, telling her what had happened, and begging her to find means of communicating with the clergyman at Ilgandah. He felt sure that kind Mrs. Cusack, in spite of her own worries after the fire, would come over to the desolate children, or would, at least, send the wife of the storekeeper or one of the women from the workings. He did not spare his horses, and was back again that night, to find that his anticipations were justified. Mrs. Cusack was there, and had taken the command of everything.

It needed just such an energetic, practical person, with abundance of the milk of human kindness for those in need, to rouse the bereaved husband, stupefied with the shock of his sudden calamity. Mrs. Cusack made all the arrangements ; got black stuff from the store, and, with the help of Mrs. Tregaskiss and the overseer's wife, rigged out the poor children in mourning. The clergyman from

Ilgandah arrived shortly. He was not a resident there, but was doing his half yearly official duty in the way of baptisms and marriages. On the third day Mrs. Carmody was buried under a clump of gum trees by the creek, on a knoll above floodmark. One of her babies, who had died a few days after its birth, was buried there. It was after that baby's coming that she had begun to get thin and have her worrying little pain and cough—and the place had been a favourite walk of the poor lady's when her day's work was over. She had been used to sit there in the cool of the evening, with her sewing, and tell the children stories. The funeral was very quiet and very pathetic. The overseer's wife and Mrs. Cusack wept bitterly. Clare Tregaskiss did not cry, but her heart was like lead ; and once, Geneste, who was there, caught a wild, strange look, which she cast out into the gidia forest, and wondered of what she was thinking. She had not allowed him opportunity for a single word of private conversation. He was then even more unhappy than she. He wrote her a long letter, which he got conveyed to her, begging her to forgive him for his proposal, if it had shocked or affronted her ; repeating his arguments in sober, matter-of-fact fashion ; asseverating his unaltered devotion, and, in conclusion, promising that he would obey whatever command she choose to put upon him. Her answer was four words only, scribbled upon a scrap of paper, which she herself put into his hand after the funeral —" Keep away from me."

Helen Cusack did not come to the funeral, but she sent a beautiful cross of white lilies and maidenhair fern. Tottie and Minnie and Miss Lawford sent one also, and there were many humbler tributes on the coffin, perhaps the most touching of all, the nosegays of native jasmine thrown by Jake and Kathleen, in gathering which Clare had kept them quiet the whole of the previous afternoon.

It was a sad little family tragedy, but not uncommon in

the outside districts, where delicate ladies lead the lives of peasant women in a tropical climate, with the enfeebling influence of which, at least, the peasant woman of the northern hemisphere has not to contend. The strong grow patient, resourceful, and hardy; the weak become patient and resourceful, too; but, after a time, fall and don't get up again. The stockmen's wives and the working-women, inheriting a strain of endurance in their blood, get on in the out-country fairly well, and may live to see their children's children; but the refined, fragile ladies will do the work of six slaveys, bear their hardships and their children without a murmur, and fight drought, heat, blight, and fever with indomitable courage for a few years; then, all of a sudden will develop rapid consumption, or some other insidious disease, and die just as their children are getting out of babyhood and the pleasant afternoon of life is coming on them.

Clare Tregaskiss was immensely affected by the melancholy incident. It seemed to her a foreshowing of her own fate. It would not be consumption that she would develop, but heart disease. Geneste had warned her. And then where would have been the use of renunciation? Her little daughters would be as utterly bereft as though she had basely forsaken them for the sake of her own selfish joy. And what good would Keith get from her sacrifice?—what good, in any case, since he had already discovered that she was incapable of making him happy? Where was the use of anything in this universal crookedness—of poor Helen's romantic love for Geneste, of her own ten years' struggle to meet her fate stoically, and to conform herself to her life? What was the good of having kept all those years a calm face and a heart unstirred in its depths, if she were to succumb like an undisciplined schoolgirl, her passion and her pain only intensified by the years of repression? Yet those words of Mrs. Carmody's haunted her, and filled her alternately with a sense of re-

morseful guilt and of immense and angry revolt. Should she, when she was dying, rejoice that she had "managed to keep straight"? Rather might not the same ghastly doubt, which had occurred to her at Mrs. Carmody's bedside, embitter her own death throes?—the doubt that perhaps, if she had not kept straight, poor soul! but had gone the way of frail womanhood, she would have had, at any rate, her hour of blessedness, and almost certainly a longer time afterward in which to repent, than had been allotted to her for the doing of her prosaic duty?

The whole Darra-Darra plan was upset, or rather postponed, by this untoward event. Geneste's Gunna-Warra messenger had met the buggies from Brinda Plains, striking off for the short-cut, and on learning what had occurred, Helen Cusack decided on her own responsibility to turn back, taking Miss Lawford and the children with her. She knew that her mother would certainly go on to Gunna-Warra, and guessed that Geneste would remain for the funeral, and that on the whole, visiting Darra was inexpedient just then. Perhaps Tregaskiss' surly mood was accounted for by this change of programme. He had gone on with Gladys Hilditch, and when Geneste arrived, had expressed himself extremely dissatisfied at his wife's non-appearance. Clare knew quite well how it had been. He had grumbled that he wanted her back at Mount Wombo, and that he wished to get there himself as soon as possible; there was no knowing what the unionists might be up to; and now that poor Mrs. Carmody was dead and done for, it wasn't as if she, Clare, could do any good by staying at Gunna-Warra. At any rate, he meant to go on home the next day; and she might do as she pleased. This was the message he sent.

Geneste said in reply that he should be delighted to escort Mrs. Tregaskiss straight over to Mount Wombo from Gunna-Warra; they could easily manage it by changing horses at Darra.

"Oh, you may escort her to the devil if you like!" roared Tregaskiss; "I don't want to interfere with you."

He pulled himself up a moment later, and blurted out a sort of apology: "The sun had given him an infernal headache; he didn't know what he was saying." Geneste saw that he had been "nipping,"—the Leura euphemism,—and turned away in silent and contemptuous acceptance of the apology.

Gladys Hilditch, who was sitting in the veranda, raised her eyebrows and went on with her book, pretending she had heard nothing. Yet Gladys was sorry for poor Tregaskiss. She divined, if Geneste did not, something of the conflict of elemental emotions which was waging within him; it was not Tregaskiss' way to keep his thoughts and feelings to himself, and on the road over he had opened out a little to Gladys. She knew that wounded pride, lawless attraction, jealousy, a galling sense of inferiority and of wrong-doing, paternal affection and conjugal impulse,—all the wilder and softer influences,—were contending in this untutored breast, and she fancied, correctly enough, that if Clare were to appeal to him in this mood, were to take him cleverly, if indeed it was worth her while to use cleverness,—for, ah, was it worth her while? Gladys asked herself,—she might discover that Keith's infatuation for Miss Lawford, as well as his evil tempers, were all part of a perverted longing for sympathy, and of a perverted love for herself.

Tregaskiss caught up Ning, hugging her with savage boisterousness: "That's my Pickaninny! we two are going to stick together, anyhow, aren't we, Pickaninny? Mummy can go her own way; it's dad that Ningie holds on by; she's a fine plucky one, this Pickaninny, and daddy will teach her to beat them all on horseback before she's six months older."

"Daddy," said Ning, seizing her opportunity, "mummy wouldn't let me ride to Brinda; and mummy says I mustn't

go when we have the picnic to Lake Eungella. Mummy says that wild blacks sit down Eungella. That mum kill Ningie. Mine think it mummy say that because she no want Ningie to go. Poor Ning!" and the child put on her appealing face. "Plenty that fellow want to go to Lake Eungella. Ning no frightened of Myall blacks. That all gammon—no blacks; only fairies and princes and nice people. Daddy said so. Do, promise! please, daddy, promise that Ning shall ride to Lake Eungella."

"All right, by Jove! Daddy promises. Ning shall ride to Lake Eungella, whether mummy agrees or not—though," he added, "there isn't much prospect of that picnic coming off yet awhile, I fancy."

"Ning," said Mrs. Hilditch later, "you are your father's child."

"Yes," averred Ning placidly, "I daddy's Pickaninny."

"Ning, you are a humbug; you are a time-server; you are a traitress; and listen to this: we are not going to Lake Eungella."

Whereupon Ning was silent; and for some few minutes ruminated. Presently she looked up:

"Auntie Gladys,"—that was what she had been told to call Mrs. Hilditch,—"mine want to ask you something. Plenty mine try to find out."

"Well, what is it, Pickaninny?"

"Aunty Gladys, suppose Ningie go bong,—I mean die," conscientiously corrected Ning, "will there be any yarraman for me to ride in heaven, or only those two fellow horses that took up Elijah's buggy?"

Gladys burst into a peal of laughter.

"You are an imp, Ning—a demon. Go and ask your father."

As it happened, Mrs. Tregaskiss did not take that long ride under Geneste's escort—he did not, indeed, go back with her at all, to Mount Wombo. Gladys Hilditch begged

permission to remain at Darra, instead of accompanying Tregaskiss and the children, and after the funeral the party from Gunna-Warra—the clergyman and another of the mourning guests rode with them thus far—found her there, and also Cyrus Chance, whose aid Gladys had by some means invoked. Old Cyrus took both his Fair Ines and the mistress to Mount Wombo on the morrow.

Geneste remaining at Darra. "You see that I begin to obey you," he whispered to Clare, as they parted.

Mrs. Tregaskiss could not imagine how it was that Cyrus Chance, who never visited a neighbour, except on strict business, should on this occasion have taken it into his head to pay a friendly call at Darra. Gladys might have enlightened her, and so might a certain black boy of the camp, where Mrs. Hilditch had been amusing herself for an hour or two the day before. The black boy bought a new set of mole-skins and a red flannel shirt, and got well drunk, on the strength of "that budgery fellow White Mary's" liberality.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE END OF THE STRIKE.

The great fire at Brinda Plains, in which both the head-station and the woolshed, with all the bales of wool ready for carting southward, had been destroyed, created an immense commotion in the district. It had been very cleverly done, so the authorities agreed, and there was a good deal of furtive pleasantry at the expense of Mr. Cusack and the specials. The two harmless-looking diggers who had halted to give news of the dispersion of the unionist force had no doubt themselves been unionists in disguise, and had imposed upon the police by the very staleness of the trick, too obvious to be suspected as a ruse. Of course, they had taken advantage of the relaxation of discipline in the watching, and of the roystering that evening at the bachelors' quarters, which had inclined the specials and gentlemen defenders to a sleep heavier than usual—in order to steal under cover of the moonless night round the head-station and fire it in the two most convenient places. Then, when all hands were engaged in battling with that conflagration, the incendiaries had completed their business by starting a second at the woolshed, and had then made away into safe hiding as speedily as they could.

For three weeks and more after poor Mrs. Carmody's death, nothing was heard in the district but rumours of warlike operations, of pursual, discovery, and arrest, most of which rumours were unfortunately not corroborated. The police scoured the country in all directions; the

squatters turned out to assist them, and a fresh force of specials was enrolled and sent up. The specials were in these days quite a feature of the neighbourhood ; they did not spend all the time in the saddle. There were off days and days and nights of watching and precaution, so that the smart gray uniforms were to be seen at many a dinner-table, and at many an impromptu dance, while the gray felt hats, picturesquely turned up at one side, became pretty generally adorned with the black and red cockatoo head feather, which it was the fashion for the Leura young ladies to present to their gallant defenders, whom, however, fate perversely defrauded of any opportunity of proving their valour on a battlefield.

For the unionists skulked and would not fight. Kelso, their leader, knew the district better than either squatters or soldiers, with the exception, perhaps, of Geneste, and led the pursuing force a devious dance, by dry water-courses, through country which that invincible enemy, thirst, at last compelled them to evacuate. It was to Geneste that the glory of capturing Kelso was due. The old lion roused up, and the ex-explorer did a ride and led a piece of tracking said to be unparalleled in the Australian record of criminal hunts. Then there was a short, sharp tussle with desperate men; shots were fired; one of their number killed, and Geneste himself slightly wounded. Finally, Kelso and one or two others of the ringleaders were arrested. The mob listened to terms formulated by a committee of squatters, and peace settled once more on the Leura. It was after Christmas that all this happened, and in the meantime Gladys Hilditch had found plenty of opportunity for acquiring information concerning the labour movement in Australia. But Gladys' interest seemed to have curiously died out since the fire at Brinda Plains. She had got very silent, and spent a good deal of time in dreamy reverie. Sometimes she was a little irritable, and sometimes she looked very sad.

There had been a week or two in which she was almost perfectly happy, a sort of after-glow following upon that divine moment when she had awakened in the garden to find herself lying upon Blanchard's arm, with Blanchard's face bent over her in agonised tenderness, and passionate words of love pouring from his lips. He had called her "Gladys," his "dearest," his "love"; had entreated her forgiveness, and in the broken, incoherent sentences, which it was bliss to her to hear, had wiped out the doubt, the pain, and the vain regret of those four years which had passed since Ironside's death put a tragic end to their intimacy. Then she had opened her eyes, and they had met his, and she knew that he must have read in them all that in her dazed condition she could not speak. The awakening had been so strange she had fancied at first that it was a dream; then she heard the shouts round her, the sound of falling timber, saw the red glare, realised that she was in her nightdress, drenched with water, and had gone off into peals of hysterical laughter.

Mrs. Cusack had come to her, and they carried her into one of the outhouses, and by and by Clare, agitated and hysterical too, had helped her to dress, and by this time the head-station was a smouldering mass, and all the force of the station had collected at the workings in a futile attempt to save the woolshed. Blanchard had gone with the rest, and she had never seen him since. The next day, when everything was over and the Cusacks were mournfully taking stock of the ruins, she was told, just before the start to Darra, that he had hurt himself in trying to save some horses confined in a shed at the back of the woolshed. It was nothing serious, Geneste had pronounced, but he had been ordered to keep quiet, and the order remained in force till Tregaskiss and the Brinda buggy had set off, the last having been delayed. Gladys had bitter suspicion later that he had wished to avoid her, but it was not till the strike was over, and there was nothing to hinder him

from riding over to Mount Wombo, that she acknowledged to herself the suspicion.

In the excitement and scurrying about the country after the fire, personal drama seemed pretty much at a standstill. Tregaskiss went out with the specials,—his physical courage was his best point,—and it was probably to his daring and animal vigour that he owed such influence as he possessed over a certain type of woman. After the fire he was away from Mount Wombo, off and on, for some time, Mr. Hansen being recalled from the out-station, and Shand taking charge. Station work was put aside everywhere just now. The district had not got over the effects of the strike; the Cusack family was occupied in mourning its losses and in plans for rebuilding. Mr. Cusack's anger expending itself in frenzied trips to the Ilgandah police station, and in the direction of his "free" labour men, whom he employed in collecting building material, while Mrs. Cusack, with her characteristic energy, set to work remodelling the bachelors' quarters as a temporary residence, the young men having established themselves in some of the huts. In all these weeks, Geneste had rigorously abstained from seeing Clare. She heard of his doings, of his part in the capture of Kelso, his accident, which like most casualities gained in the reporting, and she suffered untold agonies of anxiety, and of longing to see him and assure herself that all was well. She had not expected that he would accept her prohibition so literally; she had fancied that at least he would write; that he would implore her to reconsider her decision; that he would express regret for that mad proposition of flight, and renew his vows of platonic friendship. She hoped in spite of herself that he would disobey her,—for he had made no definite promise,—and one day appear at Mount Wombo. He did not write; he did not come. The days dragged on, and perhaps it was well for her, and for Gladys, too, that there was work to be done, and that life was full just now of minor priva-

tions. The mosquitoes swarmed, milk began to fail, there was no butter. Even the Chinaman found a difficulty in keeping his garden watered, and in producing the melons and pumpkins which made dinner not an empty mockery. The baby got a skin eruption, and was cross with her first tooth, and Gladys was flagging in spirits and did not now extol the picturesqueness of the Leura. No one came to Mount Wombo, except once the objectionable Mr. Micklethwaite on his way back from that very droving trip which had brought him near Mrs. Tregaskiss at The Grave. Clare made some whimsical reflections upon workings of coincidence and of the law of causes in the spiritual region. But for that ill-bred speech of Micklethwaite's she might never have betrayed her secret misery to Geneste. The hour would have passed, and he might, as even he had said the other day, be now Helen's promised husband. She was tormented in these weeks of apparent desertion by jealousy of Helen, which she felt to be ignoble. She fancied that Geneste had ceased to love her, and that his errant fancy had returned to Helen. Poor woman! she found no comfort in despising him.

She had told herself that it was not likely he should think so much of her while the district was perturbed by the strikers; but now that scare was over, all the squatters had settled down to their ordinary avocations, and it might be supposed that he too had resumed his former interests. She did not suspect him of a deliberate scheme to test his influence, based upon scientific and philosophic observation of woman's nature.

If this were so, he miscalculated his strength, though it would be truer to assume that he was actuated by motives less unworthy than any such cold-blooded, selfish design, and that he manfully struggled against an ever present temptation.

Even when temptation became opportunity, he struggled still. It presented itself in the shape of a letter from

Mrs. Cusack, begging that she might now take advantage of the proposal he had made just after the fire and with which Mrs. Carmody's death had interfered, and that he would receive the two girls in the schoolroom, Helen, and Miss Lawford for a week or ten days, while the bachelors' quarters was being papered and their rooms had to be vacated.

The suggestion that Mrs. Tregaskiss and Mrs. Hilditch should be invited to Darra at the same time, came as well from Mrs. Cusack, though on receipt of her letter the temptation had taken shape in his mind. Geneste had ridden over from Darra, in answer to the letter, that he might give a warmer and personal endorsement to the invitation, and they were seated after luncheon in the veranda of the bachelors' quarters, which commanded a now melancholy prospect of the back garden and old entrance to The House, of which the new foundations were rising from its charred ruins.

"Ah!" sighed Mrs. Cusack, "it upsets me to look at that. And just think of what my garden and the tennis ground will be, when those workmen have done trampling on them. Upon my word! I could cry for hours over our misfortune,—though of course it's an alleviation that the company bears part of the expense of rebuilding,—if I didn't force myself to think of those poor Carmodys, and to remember that his loss, poor man! is worse than mine. To be sure, if we hadn't been burned out, they would have been the gainers, for, of course, I'd have had all the children over on a long visit,—I hear they're running quite wild,—and Miss Lawford might have taken Jennie at lessons with Tottie and Minnie."

"Well, there's room for her, too, at Darra-Darra, Mrs. Cusack, if you like to arrange it so," said Geneste.

"Well, I don't know," answered Mrs. Cusack uneasily; "I think I'd better not begin, since one doesn't feel certain how long it might last. The truth is, Dr. Geneste,"—

and she looked round to assure herself that the governess and children were out of earshot, and at the same time cast a disapproving glance at Tregaskiss, who, while he smoked and conversed perfunctorily with Helen, was edging toward the "schoolroom end" of the veranda, presumably waiting for the emergence of Miss Lawford and her pupils,—"the truth is," continued Mrs. Cusack, "that if I saw a decent excuse for sending off Miss Lawford, I should take it. Unluckily, we bound each other to a year's engagement: we thought, you know, she might find the bush dull—so many of them do. But she has grown so flighty and queer, and so up and down in her spirits, that I don't consider her a good companion for my girls. And I must say," she added severely, "I think a certain gentleman is much too fond of going home this way from Ilgandah,—which is a great deal further round,—instead of taking the short cut by the surveyor's camp. I'm not one to suppose there's any harm in an innocent flirtation, and Mrs. Tregaskiss herself don't seem to mind it, but still—I don't intend to encourage it. I did hope that Miss Lawford would take up with that old land commissioner, who is quite 'gone' on her, even now, and he'd make her a very good husband. But it doesn't seem to come to anything, and the way she treats him is a shame. I had to give her a talking to the other day for making game of him, as she does, before everybody."

Mrs. Cusack rattled on for some time upon the subject of Miss Lawford's delinquencies, then suddenly exclaimed: "He's sure to be making excuses for going over to Darra-Darra while she's there, and I'll tell you what you might do, Dr. Geneste. Mrs. Tregaskiss and Mrs. Hilditch were to have stayed with you before: I should feel much more comfortable if you had them now."

"I don't know that Mrs. Tregaskiss would care to come," said Geneste evasively; "she is always very busy at home."

"A great deal too busy. I consider it scandalous the way he keeps her without proper white servants, while he is going in for mining shares and pitching money about at Ilgandah,—I know it for a fact,—and she who, whatever sort of rogue her father might have been, was used to something very different. Don't you agree with me?"

"Mrs. Tregaskiss doesn't complain," answered Geneste.

"No; I admire her for that. But now, look here, Dr. Geneste! Why shouldn't you get up that Lake Eungella picnic we've been talking about for so long? Though the weather is hot, one feels it less riding, and it's nice and dry for camping out. Helen is tremendously keen upon it, and so is young Gillespie, and so was Mrs. Hilditch. I think the district ought to try and make Mrs. Hilditch's visit a little more agreeable,—such a pretty woman!—and if she does lose her money by marrying again, she might save first out of her income, you know. I wish there was a chance for my Martin—he's awfully struck, I can tell you. Now, do him a good turn, Dr. Geneste, and get them to come over."

"Well, I will do my best."

"That's right. I'm not sure that I shan't try the picnic myself. I don't think my riding days are quite over yet. They tell me Lake Eungella is a sight, and you'll never manage the trip if you don't do it now, before the rainy season."

"Do you think we shall have a rainy season?"

"Well, it doesn't look like it—worse luck! But one goes on hoping, and when it does come, there 'll be floods, and no mistake. That's the way in Australia, waste or famine. Mr. Cusack says that if the drought doesn't break up, it 'll mean the ruin of every station with a heavy debt on it. I tell Mr. Blanchard that will be his time to invest."

"Blanchard had better keep his eye on Darra-Darra, if he is looking out for an investment."

"Why, I know that Darra-Darra has got nothing of

a debt! You don't mean that you are thinking of selling?"

"It is not so very unlikely. I feel as though I ought to go back and have another try at the old country," he replied vaguely.

That was how the report, which reached Clare a few days later, was started. Mrs. Cusack told the people at Brinda that she had it on Geneste's own authority he was going shortly to sell Darra and settle again in England, and Mr. Mickleth waite carried it to Mount Wombo.

"Well, what do you think about the picnic?" continued Mrs. Cusack. "Come over here, Nell, and persuade Dr. Geneste. We all want to be cheered up after the fire and the strike. I don't think she is looking herself, is she, now?"

"I am quite well," declared Helen, growing red.

"Well, my dear, there's no disgrace in it. Now, just go and settle with Mr. Tregaskiss at once, doctor, and then write a note to his wife. You can't get out of it. Martin has set his heart on taking Mrs. Hilditch, and he'll get the picnic up if you don't, and you are bound to have the whole lot of us for a night at Darra-Darra, anyhow. I'll send along a pack-horse with cakes and jam and goodies."

"Would you like it?" asked Geneste of Helen.

"Very much, indeed!"

"And shall I write to Mrs. Tregaskiss and ask her? I haven't seen her since poor Mrs. Carmody's funeral."

"Of course we could not go without her and Mrs. Hilditch," said Helen.

Tottie and Minnie came out of the schoolroom and were wild with delight at the prospect. Tregaskiss joined in. Of course it was the very time for a spree. Everybody had been in the dumps long enough. They'd make a big affair of it—the whole strength of the three stations. It wasn't such a bad riding track, and he knew of a splendid place for a camp. Of course they'd take

their guns and have some sport with pelicans. And then, Geneste had never given a house-warming; and here was an opportunity for entertaining the district before the last batch of specials went away. There should be a dance at Darra-Darra. Oh, he'd answer for his wife. Of course she and Mrs. Hilditch would be there; no doubt they'd stay the week, if Geneste liked. Only he must bargain for Ning: he had promised the Pickaninny that whenever that picnic came off she was to ride to it. By Jove! she was going to be a magnificent horsewoman, that kiddie. Her mother didn't approve of her being out on the run: said it would spoil her complexion; make her back crooked —some rot of that sort. He intended that the girl should grow up a sensible, strong woman, and none of your weedy, sickly creatures. Fortunately she had inherited his constitution. He had just broken in a filly for her—quiet as a spaniel, and paces that he'd wager Cusack couldn't beat in all his famous breed, and so on. As for himself, he had been planning mustering that end of the run, and would begin next week. He'd be camped close to Darra and would drop in and—jocularly to Minnie—see how they were getting on at lessons.

Mrs. Cusack interrupted him severely. "Now look here, Mr. Tregaskiss, I think you had much better begin mustering at the other end of your run first, and I dare say Mr. Cusack will lend you a hand or two if you want it. And mind, I'm going over to take command at Darra-Darra, since Dr. Geneste hasn't got a lady of his own, and I warn you that I shall decline to receive you unless you bring Mrs. Tregaskiss and Mrs. Hilditch. I don't approve of these gay bachelor outings of yours, and I don't believe in the Ilgandah business either."

Geneste did not write at once to Mrs. Tregaskiss. Keith went home that evening and told his wife and Mrs. Hilditch that the Cusacks and Geneste were getting up a picnic to Lake Eungella, and two days later one of the

Cusack boys arrived with the same intelligence, supplemented by that additional piece of news about Geneste's contemplated abandonment of the Leura.

Mrs. Tregaskiss received it impassively, but she made an excuse presently to leave the veranda where they were all sitting.

"What has become of Mr. Blanchard?" asked Mrs. Hilditch irrelevantly, as soon as she and Martin were alone. "Why doesn't he come over here?"

"Oh, the bishop? He's in the dumps—like the rest of us. We all hate being turned out of quarters; and we are cursing the unionists all day and all night,—mostly night, when we are camping out looking for timber for the new woolshed, and the mosquitoes have got their nippers into us. My word, Mrs. Hilditch! you should feel the mosquitoes' nips out by Brigalow Creek."

"I feel them quite enough here, thank you," replied Gladys. "I'm beginning to get very tired of the Leura, Mr. Martin, and you may tell Mr. Blanchard so. I shall go back to England unless you do something at once to amuse me; you may tell Mr. Blanchard that, too."

"Oh, but there's the picnic!" blurted Martin; "and Geneste has half promised that we may have a dance before the specials leave altogether, and you'll come to that, Mrs. Hilditch?"

"Dr. Geneste hasn't asked us yet; I presume that he intends to. Nobody except Mr. Chance has been near us for ages. Never in my life have I been so neglected. I'm obliged to feed my vanity on the compliments I get from the blacks' camp; you know, Mr. Martin, 'Budgery White Mary, that fellow!' becomes monotonous after you have heard it a good many times. Suppose you were to try now and give me a change."

Poor Martin got very red and rubbed his forehead with his silk pocket-handkerchief, becoming more confused still when he perceived that half of it had been torn off for crackers.

"I wish you'd teach me how to make crackers," said Gladys. "And look here, Mr. Martin, I want you to take a message from me to Mr. Blanchard. Tell him that I particularly wish to see him before I go back to England. Tell him that I shall expect to meet him at Dr. Geneste's picnic. Tell him that I want to ask him what he would like me to say to his people about him. Do you understand?"

"Yes. I say, Mrs. Hilditch, is it true that Blanchard's relations are great swells; and that they've cut him because he got into a mess or something? I shouldn't have thought he was the sort of chap to get into a mess. His cobra is chock full of notions about what is right to do and what isn't. Perhaps you don't know that cobra is blacks' language for skull, do you?"

"Yes, I do. Ning taught me that, and I've been learning at the camp. Now, go on."

"Well, is it true?"

"Whether his relations are swells? Yes, I suppose you'd call them swells. His cousin is Lord Somebody, and, as he has no children, the chances are Mr. Blanchard may be Lord Somebody, too, some day."

"Oh, I say!"

"You won't chaff him so much, now. I did think Australians were above that sort of snobbishness, but you're as bad as the worst of us over there."

Martin looked abashed. "You seem to get huffy if I ask you anything about Blanchard, so I won't talk about him."

"No, don't! Yes, do! Tell me what you do when you are camping out. Is he good company?"

"First rate," rejoined Martin, "when the mater is not by to chaff him; it's the mater and the old man who are worst at it, and he always dries up when they're by. But you'd really be surprised at the lot Blanchard has got in his cobra."

"Should I?" said Gladys sarcastically.

"My word, yes! He lets you know he's about when it's a case of doing anything solid, or getting the rights off a chap. You should have heard him taking a rise out of Tummeril, the government geologist."

"That must have been very interesting; I should like to hear about that."

"Old Tummeril was out prospecting, and he picked up a bit of burnt earth—the stuff you know that cakes up in a hollow tree after the blacks have set fire to it. 'That's volcanic lava,' says Tummeril. 'No,' says the bishop, 'it's burnt stump.' 'What do you know about it?' says Tummeril. 'I tell you it's volcanic lava.' 'Burnt stump,' says the bishop, and he stuck to it, and burnt stump it proved to be. Old Tummeril looked green, I can tell you. These geologist fellows seem to know precious little about their business," sapiently concluded Martin.

Then Mrs. Hilditch artfully led the youth on to tell her more anecdotes about Blanchard, and on the whole enjoyed the hour she spent with him on the veranda more than she had enjoyed anything during the last three weeks. And meanwhile, Clare Tregaskiss was stretched upon her bed, the pillow stuffed into her mouth, and her whole frame convulsed with tearless sobs. What was she to do? How was she to get rid of the pain? How was she to fight this awful thing which had taken possession of her? How was she to separate herself from him? How was she to conquer this love which was stronger than anything else in the universe, except two little helpless babes? Oh, if it were but possible—if only those two small creatures, who dragged at her and held her from him, had no existence, then what bliss to do what he asked of her—to yield up her life into his keeping.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AT DARRA-DARRA.

Geneste's letter of invitation, when Jemmy Rodd brought it, was friendly, and formally cordial, and conveyed little satisfaction to Mrs. Tregaskiss. It had only two sentences of balm : "I hope that you will come. I have been wishing very much that I might go and see you."

Clare was in the mood for heroism, born of a passionate self-disgust, and her refusal would have been more than probable but for three compelling reasons, outside her own unquenchable longing. Tregaskiss insisted, Gladys insisted, and Ning insisted. So, with a guilty joy in her heart, and a great dread, she packed her saddle-bags,—for they were to ride to Darra-Darra in view of the camping-out expedition afterward,—and sent a message to Mrs. Ramm, fortunately still camped between the two stations, begging her to come over and take care of the baby for four days.

Darra-Darra station ran into the hilly country. The head-station was situated on the very border of the plain, on a sharply projecting knoll, two sides of which sloped gently downward, while the other descended abruptly to the level, presenting a sparsely wooded precipice, and thus giving the place, from a distance, almost the appearance of a fortification. The usual lagoon lay at the foot of this knoll, and grape vines and recently planted fruit trees, as well as some older ones, ran down to it. On a barren patch of the mound, along the cliff, grew several weird-looking, twisted, and blackened grass trees, which Geneste

had wisely allowed to remain. The house was low, like all Australian houses, and zinc-roofed, with deep verandas. It consisted of two buildings, the new stone rooms of which Geneste had boasted, and the original cottage, dilapidated and almost covered with creepers. Besides these, there were the kitchen and the various outbuildings. Behind rose the lowest spurs of the range which had to be crossed before Eungella Lake could be reached, and in front stretched the brown, ocean-like plain. The whole place, from its position, was peculiar and picturesque.

A number of people on horseback met the Tregaskiss party when it was within a mile or two of the station. These were Helen Cusack,—looking fresh and dainty in her holland riding-habit and frilled sunbonnet,—her two sisters, their unbound manes flowing out as they cantered along, Miss Lawford, Martin Cusack, and Geneste. There were the conventional salutations and a mingling of *parties*, in a straggling line, till the paddock slip-rails were passed through ; then a dropping into twos, Martin Cusack and Gladys leading. It was natural that Mrs. Tregaskiss and her host should pair. Ning, on the quiet filly which Tregaskiss had broken for her, dragged by her mother's side, more tired with her twenty miles' ride than she would own, and put a slight restraint on the conversation.

Clare's gray veil was raised, and Geneste scanned her features.

"You are looking very unwell," he exclaimed. "Have you been fainting again? Yes ; you need not equivocate. I know that you have."

"It was not a bad attack. I did not mean to equivocate. The heat upset me, and baby has not been well ; and things have been generally trying."

"Do you know," he asked abruptly, "that it is just six weeks since Mrs. Carmody's funeral?"

"Yes."

"Six weeks in which I have not heard your voice or

looked on your face, or had a line of your handwriting. It was cruel not to give me a word."

"You never wrote to me."

"I beg your pardon. I wrote you many letters, but I never sent one of them."

"Ah! Why?"

"I was afraid that perhaps I had said in them what might offend you."

She was silent.

"Well," he said, "I have obeyed you."

"Yes," she answered.

"Surely 'thou shalt praise me to-day, O Cæsar!' Have you no commendation for me?"

"I can't—— You know——" She broke off. "Have you—have you seen much of the Cusacks?"

"I have been over pretty often. Helen and Miss Lawford are staying here, while they are doing up the quarters over there; with Martin coming backward and forward, and Tottie and Minnie to preserve the proprieties."

Tregaskiss called out to Ning:

"Pickaninny, there's a log for you! Come and show Miss Lawford how I have taught you to jump."

The child drew back; Clare and Geneste did not wait. They were now alone.

"Clare!" he cried, "you have been very unhappy?"

"That is true," she replied. "Why do you torment me? Why will you not let us be friends?"

"*I* torment you! Yes, my dear,"—his whole manner changed to that winning way which was so sweet to her,—"let us be friends. I think in truth we must have been enemies during these long six weeks—these interminable weeks."

"Tell me," she asked, "is it true? I heard through the Cusacks, as a fact, that you are going soon to sell Darra, and leave the Leura."

"We talked of it, do you not remember? Under certain

conditions I think it is more than probable, but I have made no plans."

"Under certain conditions!" she repeated, a terrified note in her voice.

He, wilfully misinterpreting it, exclaimed:

"Don't be afraid. I shall ask no more impossibilities; but," he added in a lower tone, "you must not expect impossibilities from me."

They reached the entrance, and he became again the courteous host. After tea had been taken in the veranda, and the dusk was falling, and it became a question of allotting rooms to the guests, Geneste turned to Helen, not realising the subtle and intense bitterness there was to Clare in his manner of so doing.

"You and Mrs. Cusack settled things so that Mrs. Tregaskiss would be as comfortable as she could be in my bachelor diggings," he said. "Mrs. Cusack has deserted us," and he now looked at Clare. "She said that we should not want a chaperon now you were here; and she was afraid the men would put up the wrong paper at Brinda. We've had to give up the notion of the ball," he added, as they walked along the veranda; "it was too ambitious, and we were afraid it would prevent the ladies from being fresh for Eungella. Besides, there were difficulties about music, as I haven't got a piano. However, Martin discovered a fiddle among the free labourers at the workings, and Blanchard is coming over later with the performer in charge; so perhaps, after all, we may manage a very humble 'hop' for the children."

He bowed at the door of a room in the stone building and left them. Helen stood back for Mrs. Tregaskiss to enter.

"Oh, he has given me up his own room!" Clare said, and her bitterness all went away; he had reserved this compliment for her, though after all it was the most natural thing in the world. She knew that it must be his

room from the books and photographs and personal belongings. Woman-like, she took note of all the little niceties.

"He would not hear of anything else," answered Helen. "He wanted to give it up to mother, but she liked best being with me in my room. Mother thought, Mrs. Tregaskiss, that you and Mrs. Hilditch and Ning could manage with this little dressing-place, as the place is all rather crowded, and that Mr. Tregaskiss would be more comfortable in the bachelors' quarters with the other gentlemen."

Gladys was herself again; and yet not herself. For the first, since her coming among them, she put on a black dress, and it seemed to sober her, and invest her somehow with a certain tragic dignity. It was a black dress the like of which had never been seen upon the Leura—all soft, dark filminess and indescribable folds, through which her white neck gleamed, and out of which emerged her bare round arms, with queer-looking bracelets clasping them above the elbow. Beside her, Miss Lawford's costume of net and bugles and crimson satin ribbon looked tawdry, and its wearer vulgar. Ambrose Blanchard watched Mrs. Hilditch as she came along the veranda, her delicate, proud face and golden head rising out of the blackness of her gown, and thought of old Cyrus Chance's name for her—"Fair Ines"; thought of Felmarshes, and of her beauty and sweetness and passionate disdain of the sordid banalities of her life, in those early days, when she had been the ideal lady of his dreams. She had seemed to him then a being too refined, rare, and exquisite for even the commonplace magnificence which surrounded her—a sort of queen who should just, by right of nature, possess everything that gold could buy, and yet despise it, as queens ought to despise their material state and appanage. But deprived of the state and appanage, how could she exist? She was poor now, in comparison with her former wealth. After all, five thousand a year is not such a tremendous income, though for a solitary woman it means power to indulge in

all manner of luxuries. He shuddered as he felt himself assailed by a fiercer temptation than any which had ever visited him. Could he be so selfish and cowardly as to take advantage of this beautiful Quixotic being, who, something told him, would sacrifice readily for his sake all the advantages of her position, and condemn her to a lifetime of hardship, and probably of disillusion.

Gladys went straight up to him and held out her hand. She had schooled herself, while she was dressing, to the meeting.

"You have not given me an opportunity of thanking you for having dragged me out of that dreadful burning room," she said quite conventionally. "I hope Mr. Martin gave you my message."

"Martin told me you were good enough—that you wanted to see me," he stammered. "I am sorry not to have been able to come over; but——"

"Blanchard, will you give Mrs. Hilditch your arm?" said Geneste, passing on with Mrs. Tregaskiss.

The dinner was a little constrained: the party was not large enough for collective hilarity, or for confidential duologue; and the conversation was mainly about the road to Eungella Lake: the chance of rain in the hills having swelled the lake, or of the drought having dried it up, so putting the mirage, which was what everybody wanted to see, out of the question. Of course, too, there was a good deal of talk about the strike, and the rebuilding of The House, and other local topics; but it was all more or less forced. Almost all present were preoccupied with their individual anxieties—except, indeed, the three or four bushmen: Martin, Mr. Shand, and some others, among them a late arrival from the Gulf district, who had wonderful tales about alligators and cannibal blacks and other horrors, to the edification of Ning and the younger Cusack girls. Their end of the table was very cheerful, but at the other, Geneste and Mrs. Tregaskiss

said little, having always the shadow between them of crisis and perhaps tragic separation. Gladys and Mr. Blanchard were oppressed with a sweet and terrifying agitation, and Helen Cusack, thrilled with something of the martyr's enthusiasm of renunciation, was yet nervously eager to avert the declaration which she knew young Gillespie was going to make her, while Tregaskiss, in his rude fashion, had his own doubts, bewilderments, and emotions of various kinds. In his breast surged unwonted feelings; he, too, was suffering the education of pain. He felt anger, jealousy, miserable dissatisfaction with himself and with all the world, restless hunger for he scarcely knew what—his wife's affection or a more potent excitement; and the reckless resolve to still, at any cost, the vague remorse which was tormenting him. In an odd, intuitive way he divined something in his wife's nature which had never been there before these days—something which was not for him, and had never been for him, and which was worth a million times more than the passive obedience, the half reluctant acceptance of caresses, that represented all the love she had ever given him. It angered him that the best of his own possessions should be but a shadowy possession—a right in name and not in fact; and though he could not define his jealousy of Geneste, could not make out to himself any statement of injury, did not suspect his wife of the least dereliction from the path of wifely honour, the conciousness of a wrong was always with him, and it goaded him to seek sources of distraction, one of which, at any rate, was fairly effectual. In truth, of late intemperance had become so much a habit with poor Keith Tregaskiss, that though he never openly disgraced himself, he was yet never wholly himself. Perhaps Miss Lawford's state of mind would bear an even less close analysis.

"Will you come and look at my curios and Egyptian things?" Geneste said to Mrs. Tregaskiss, when dinner was over, and the party had dispersed, some to the garden to

gather loquats and Cape mulberries ; others to lounge and smoke and chatter about the veranda and steps ; and the children and their traveller from the Gulf to start a game of romps by moonlight. The dance had fallen through, after all. Martin's fiddler having been found to have "gone on the spree."

"I am not very sorry," said Geneste. "I want you all to be as fit as you can be for the ride to-morrow."

He had taken her into what he called "the office," which was, however, very different from the usual station office—a receptacle for stockwhips and guns, and a place in which to keep the ledgers. Geneste's office was lined with books, and had comfortable armchairs and some prettinesses; it was, in fact, where he spent most of his time indoors. She looked round it, examining the books and taking stock of everything, as a woman does of the place inhabited by the man she cares for.

He drew a chair forward and arranged the lamp.

"Sit here, and I'll put the things on this table for you ; there's nothing really to look at,—only a few odds and ends,—and it was an excuse to bring you away."

He unlocked some drawers and brought out coins and scarabei and odds and ends, mostly barbaric, from different countries he had visited. She examined the collection almost in silence, and he talked only conventionalities, telling her anecdotes about his little properties and how he had acquired them. Suddenly she swept the whole subject away, as it were, with a wave of her hand, and got up, standing in front of the open door, which gave upon a quiet corner of the garden. The weird-looking grass trees were silhouetted against the sky, and beyond stretched the great shadowy plain. To Clare that vast expanse of dead level meeting the sky was like the wall of a gigantic prison.

"How can you endure to stay in this awful place," she exclaimed, "when you have the whole world before you to

choose from, and when you know what's best in it to choose—not like Martin Cusack and Mr. Shand and the others, who let their lives rust out from sheer ignorance?"

He had risen and followed her.

"I have sometimes asked myself that question," he said.

"Then go," she said passionately, "and let us have done with this. In good truth, it is too hard for me to bear. I was better off in the old lonely life than now, when I am tossed, torn, tortured, and self-hating. I think I'd rather be buried alive straight away, and have the stone shut down upon me past all hope, than live on in the agony I've been enduring these last weeks. Oh, if I were in your place I wouldn't bear it either! No woman is worth all that. See what I am making you suffer now, by my moods and my complaints, but I can't help it; I can only say to you, Go!"

He came a little closer, and would have answered her recklessly with an embrace, but she made an imperious gesture.

"No! Yes, of course, I know that you would say: that you are not unhappy as long as we can be together—unless you have changed to me and have taken me at my word and put Helen, in my place, as, Heaven help me! I have been madly fancying of late—— No, you haven't, I know, but it makes no difference. We can't be together! I daren't let you come near me, and say all the things that are so sweet. I dare not! I dare not! that is the truth. And so you had better go. Oh, if I were but a man, and could escape as you might do! If I could just break from everything and roam, and roam, and never come back again."

Her voice dropped in a long cadence like the beat of a wild bird's wings, and she made a motion with her arms which reminded him of that moment of self-abandonment at The Grave, and touched him with something of her own despair.

"Clare," he cried, "you talk as if we couldn't help ourselves, as though we were bound by some grim fate to torture ourselves and each other. And it isn't so. The whole thing rests with you. If you choose you *can* break away from everything and we will roam—and roam together."

Again she silenced him by that quick gesture, and he remained waiting, not daring to say more till she should speak, or at least look at him. But she did neither; only leaned her head wearily against the lintel of the door and looked out, her eyes seeming to pierce through far-reaching vistas, her chin slightly raised, and every feature ravaged by the spiritual combat within her. He stood watching her, no less moved, but perfectly still. There was nothing in the attitude of either to rouse suspicion in an observer's mind of anything strained or unusual in their relation, but there was much in the expression of their faces.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"YOU MAKE ME HATE YOU!"

Both Clare and Geneste had forgotten that their position in the lighted room made them an easy target for observation from the dim garden, or, if the passing thought had occurred to Geneste when they came in, he dismissed it, remembering how little frequented was that bit of the garden. As it happened, however, Tregaskiss had strolled hither with his pipe, and that moment came within eye-range of the office door. He had wanted to escape some disagreeable close questioning of the Gulf traveller about a northern gold mine, in which he had been interested to a greater extent than he wished people to know, for it had turned out a bubble. Moreover, he had other and more unpleasant matters to ponder, for just before leaving Mount Wombo he had received a letter from the manager of his bank, informing him of the impending visit of an inspector to report on the security Mount Wombo now offered for the debt and increasing overdraft. He had been nursing his irritation till it had become smouldering fury, and the scene which he surprised was like a match set to inflammable material. He had been looking for Clare, in order that he might tell her this piece of bad news, and thus vent some of his annoyance, and he had been much displeased at the arrangement which located him among the bachelors, far from her. Now he had found her, but not listless and indifferent, as he had expected, but alive and quivering with some strange and, for the moment to him, incomprehensible emotion. He had never seen the shadow of such a look

upon her face before. The light fell full upon her, and he could read every lineament. It seemed to lift her to a region far, far away from the hardships and worries of their common lot. She would not care, he told himself bitterly, if he were ruined to-morrow—or killed, for that matter. She was absorbed by some overmastering feeling, of which he had no knowledge, which had nothing to do with him or her married life. He at this moment was no more to her than the dust she might shake off her feet. What did it mean? What had happened to her? Then he caught sight of Geneste, too, and the whole thing flashed upon him, and in a second he was given the key to much that during all their life together had irked and puzzled him in Clare, and that of late had, in a manner for which he could hardly account, stirred up the brute and the devil in himself. Her stillness, her coldness, her apathy, the queer notions, as he called them, conveyed to him more by her reserve on some topics than by actual words, and which had made him call her "uncanny,"—everything in her that had baffled him and had made him feel, in a dull way, that his marriage was an incomplete thing,—seemed to become clear, revealed in those two faces. Clare had never cared for him; she had always despised him, and she had only kept silence and pretended to be loyal as long as she despised everybody else on the Leura, since she considered no one worthy of being her confidant. But Geneste was different. From the first he had seen that she was trying to prove to him how superior she was to her husband and to her surroundings—exalting herself at his (Tregaskiss') expense. He had formerly derived a certain satisfaction, mingled with his discontent, at her aloofness. If she were cold and odd at times to him, she was disdainful to everybody else; and, at any rate, this implied the possession of a superfine article, of which he was undisputed master and might claim all the glory. But now he realised that he was not Clare's

undisputed master; that someone else had the power to lift her out of her stately, impassive self; that her whole being was in rebellion against him, and that she held him in contempt,—there was the sting to Tregaskiss,—despised his manners, his want of intellectuality, even his physical strength and comeliness; and sometimes, when he had bragged about her to Geneste, as was a way of his, Candaules' fashion, Geneste no doubt laughed at him in his sleeve. Tregaskiss writhed at the thought, knowing well how Clare felt. Tregaskiss' jealousy was not of the ordinary conjugal kind. In a curious way, he had been pleased that Geneste should admire Clare, should even fall in love with her; that was a tribute to himself. It was of his power and prestige that he was jealous, and he was more bitter against Clare than against Geneste. Some two-edged remarks that Geneste had incautiously made to him; certain sayings of the Cusacks and of Miss Lawford, which he had not made much of at the time, but which had festered nevertheless, came back and strengthened his case against his wife. She was making him the laughing-stock of the district. This was the meaning of all that dangling at Mount Wombo—"sentimentality and rot," as he put it—at the time of her attack of fever, which he had not believed in. Geneste was in love with his wife. No doubt he had told her so. Now Tregaskiss said to himself that he understood the cessation of intimacy during these last weeks. There was no doubt that Clare had a sentimental fancy for the man,—her face told him that,—but no doubt, too, she had gone into heroics and mounted her virtuous horse and sent him away. That would be like Clare. She would do her duty, and, he added, in a sort of *sotto voce*, be "d——d unpleasant" about it. She was not the woman to go off the rails; she had not the temperament. Tregaskiss argued upon his own experience of the limitations of her temperament, as husbands who consider their wives be-

yond temptation are wont to do. It was very curious how, in all his anger and jealousy, he never suspected his wife or Geneste of any serious lapse from rectitude. Indeed, their impeccability, as he believed it, roused more of the wicked feelings in him. In a perverse way, he could have found in their strayings justification for his own deviation from the straight path. In that mood of his he would have been glad—and yet the thought was hell—of a legitimate outlet for all morbid passions that swelled in him.

But there was nothing—no reasonable excuse for rushing in and assaulting Geneste, if he had been so minded. Besides he was a coward, and cowards always prefer to bully a woman. The two stood apart; they had not even touched hands; there was nothing to betray them but their faces, hers with that wonderful emotion transfiguring it: passion, longing disgust, unutterable weariness of the very air she breathed, and of the great plain which was her prison—that was how he interpreted it, with a more correct divination than might have been expected of him, and Geneste's, no less full of agitation, and telling of a conflict which Tregaskiss read, according to his interpretation of things, as the struggle of rebuffed desire. Of course Clare had rebuffed him. Tregaskiss could imagine the pleading and the answer, but the pleading had stirred in her a consonant chord of passion.

"Infernal puppy!" muttered Tregaskiss, and yet his distorted notion of revenge fixed itself upon Clare, and not upon the man, with whom, in truth, he had something of the man's sympathy—upon Clare, in whose innocence he nevertheless firmly believed. What right had she to be setting herself up above everybody else—giving herself confounded airs of superiority and sneering at other women who were human? He remembered a look across the dinner-table—a glance only—which he had intercepted on its way to Miss Lawford. He made a step forward,

with the bald intention of confronting the two, calling her out to him, and proving his ownership. Then a change of attitude in the man he was watching arrested him. Geneste said something to Clare in a low voice,—Tregaskiss could not hear the words,—and she had turned and had answered him hurriedly, it seemed entreatingly. And then Geneste had quietly left her, closing the door behind him.

It was not much of a scene on which to build a tragedy. What had really happened just then was, as Tregaskiss conjectured, that Geneste had become aware, somehow, of his presence in the garden, and had begged Clare to return with him to the veranda, and she had bidden him leave her till she could face the others more composedly. She moved from the window, and stood by the table on which the curios were still spread out. She could hear her husband's step now scrunching the gravel, though she was not certain that it was he. At any rate, she was not going to fly away, like a frightened schoolgirl, and so waited for him till he had reached the log steps that led straight into the garden. Tregaskiss stood there a moment, and took his pipe out of his mouth, shaking a shower of red ashes to the ground. "I want to speak to you," he said.

She knew by his voice that he was not himself, and merely bowed her head. He stepped into the room beside her.

"Look here!" he said; "I'll not have you whining and complaining about me—making yourself out an injured martyr and me a brute. Do you suppose I can't guess what you've been talking about to Geneste—getting him to pity you?—we all know what that leads to. He's in love with you—you can't deny it. Very well, if it amuses you, carry on as much as you please, and take the consequences. But don't presume to find fault with me, and don't think that I'm going to be made a fool of and ridden rough-shod over. If you do, you are very much mistaken. Do you hear?"

She drew herself together with a little shiver, but did not answer. Her silence goaded on Tregaskiss.

"Do you hear?" he repeated. "I have found you out at last. I know how you have been working against me—spoiling my credit in the district. Old Cyrus Chance first—curse him! Do you fancy he's going to leave you any money for it—and the Cusacks and Geneste? Just when I want to raise some money to get me out of a hole, and keep the bank from coming down on me! And then, setting my own child against me! Telling Ning she's not to do what I want. Forbidding her to go out walking with Miss Lawford, making out that her father's friends aren't good enough for her. Signalling to her to come and stop by you, when she is quite jolly with Miss Lawford and the rest. You thought I didn't see you! Oh, I can read you through and through! I know your underhand ways. Too mean to say a thing out. But to set the Pickaninny against me! That is what I won't stand. No, I'm d——d if I do!"

"I have never done any such thing, Keith, as to set your child against you; and what you say is like madman's talk."

"You'll tell me I'm drunk, I suppose. That's what you are always insinuating. And you've been telling Geneste the same thing—taking away my character behind my back. Will you swear to me that you've never said a word against me to him? Come, you daren't! You know that I could bring witnesses forward to prove that you've belittled me to the Cusacks. What were you talking about before I came along and saw you both standing here? Will you swear that you never told him I drank, and was unkind to you? Come, answer me!"

She made no reply.

"Answer me!" he cried again. "When I was away that time, and you pretended to be ill, you made out your case. Didn't you, now? I'm a brute, and you are immacu-

late. And I took you away from your English comforts and grandeur. Forced you to marry me, eh! and buried you in this hole of a district, and treat you no better than a black gin—don't give you decent white servants, that's your cry to Mrs. Cusack. Oh, I've heard all about it! When you know I've offered you a proper nurse scores of times! You didn't say a word, did you, about your thief of a father; didn't tell them that I took pity on you when your other lover cast you off, and all your fine friends would have nothing to say to you? Where would you be now if I hadn't come forward, like the fool I was? You didn't despise me then, nor the Leura neither. This is your gratitude, and you haven't got a word to say for yourself. You're ashamed to look me in the face!"

Still she was silent, but she made a movement as if she would have left the room. He caught her arm.

"I will have an answer! By G——d, I'll not have dirt thrown at me behind my back without punishing you, and knowing the reason why!"

"You are hurting me. You insult me! Keith, don't! You make me *hate* you!"

"I thought as much. You've hated me all these years, when I've been sweating to get things for you—loading you with kindness. And you've been working against me in the dark. Poisoning the Pickaninny's mind against her father! The Pickaninny, who's the thing I care for most in the world! If it wasn't for the Pickaninny, I'd cut the whole concern to-morrow and be happy in my own way, and let you go yours and be d——d to you. I'm sick of it all, I tell you; sick of your cold, stand-off, contemptuous ways. I'm glad you've spoken out at last. You hate me, do you? Very well. I hate you, and that's the honest truth, and you may go to —— for all I care! Get out of my sight, you mean, skulking devil!"

He loosed his hold on her as he poured forth the evil words. And then, to the disgrace of his manhood, poor,

mad, half-drunken Tregaskiss lifted his hand and struck his wife. He had lost all control over himself. The proportions of things were all clouded and distorted to his inflamed, drink-saturated brain. Never before had he spoken to her in this way, violent as he had sometimes been, and never before had he raised his hand against her. The shock of it seemed for the moment almost more than she could bear. She staggered and turned very white. The blow tingled on her shoulder beneath her thin dress, and made a great red patch under the gauze. He looked at her for a second, abashed at what he had done, but something seemed to come between her and him, and blur and blotch her image, distorting it like his own fancies of her, and the brute in him kept the upper hand.

"Go and tell him that, too, and then let him come and settle things with me. I'm ready for him!"

"Yes," she said, almost in a whisper, from the intensity of her scorn and hate, "I *will* tell him, and from to-night, Keith, all is ended between you and me."

She went past him, and down the steps into the garden, then along the gravel path by the back of the house to the end of the big veranda from which her own room opened. She could see the flutter of dresses away down in the garden, and could hear the laughter of the two little Cusack girls, and the sound of Ambrose Blanchard's voice, singing a love song at the other end of the veranda. The night was young yet, and these people were amused and occupied. It would be a long time before they thought of bed.

She crept into her room. Oh, the relief of knowing that this night, at least, her husband would not share it with her. Ning lay fast asleep in the stretcher bed that had been improvised for her in the bathroom adjoining, her little limbs half uncovered, and her elfish locks streaming about the pillow. Gladys' bed had the mosquito nets drawn close, and was, of course, empty. Clare determined that she would get into bed and pretend to be asleep, so

that Gladys might not ask her questions. She took off her dress, and stood before the glass looking at herself—at her stony face, in which the eyes were like living things, so bright were they, and at the cruel red mark upon the whiteness of her neck. The thought came to her that it might be well Gladys should see that mark. She remembered Geneste's suggestion about the possibility of legitimately gaining her freedom. But she dismissed the notion as though it had been a guilty one. That would be mean indeed—at least so it seemed to her. Through all her outraged dignity, and woman's revolt against what he had done, her conscience found excuse for Tregaskiss. He had upbraided her coarsely, and in one sense wrongfully, and he had struck her; but in another sense had she not deserved the upbraidings, and, according to rough and ready ethics, the blow? She had not taken her husband's character away to Mrs. Cusack, nor had she ever tried to set his child against him; but had she not been false to her wifely vow in a far worse way? Had she not allowed herself to consider as a possibility—nay, was she not even now almost consenting to that which would give him a right to punish her by separating her forever from her children? He had not accused her of the greater wrong; he had had faith in her so far—which was in its way noble of him, magnanimous, and through everything it touched her. It was for the paltry ignoble cause that he had struck her. There was bathos in the combination of ideas, which in spite of the tragedy of the situation made her laugh aloud in grim amusement.

She blew out the light when she was in bed, and lay quite still, the moonlight streaming in through the creepers which screened the veranda, and making a vine-leaf pattern on the floor. The bruise on her shoulder smarted, and forced her thoughts back, in spite of herself, to that scene with her husband, which, as she went over and over it with all the unconscious exaggeration of recent happening,

seemed to her,—putting aside all else that was involved,—seemed to have altered the whole course of her life. Never, she told herself, could they two live together again in amity, or even peace. She was a woman of great self-control, in the ordinary emotions of life, slow to wrath, and not given to denunciation or meaningless declaration. She had said words to him which were, to her, of momentous issue, and which could never be unsaid. She had told him that he made her hate him, and he, in return, had said that he hated her. How could they pretend any longer? Whatever happened, those words would always come up between them and make union seem the more horrible, because each would know that they were true. For it was the truth—it had always been the truth. Their natures were antagonistic to the core, and nature would have her way, and truth would out, at last, however rigorously and however long it had been kept sealed within its prison.

"Yes, I do hate him," the poor, quivering thing whispered to herself, as she lay huddled up, the sheet drawn over her face to hide it from the moonlight, and the same fierce feeling of relief came to her, in thus giving vent to her secret thought, as when she had whispered to herself of another man: "Oh, I do love him! I do love him!"

By and by Gladys came in. She was humming a little song,—the one Blanchard had been singing,—in the way that girls do when their hearts are light from the meeting with their love. Gladys felt like a girl this evening, and her heart was relieved of a great oppression. She, too, stood and looked at herself, and smiled happily at her own image. There were no tragic thoughts in her mind; she had passed that phase of life; it had come to her early and was all over now. Clare thought bitterly that fate had let off Gladys easily, but Clare did not know that the burden of a man's death lay upon Gladys' soul.

Gladys did not at first remember her friend, so taken up was she with her own pleasant imaginings, but presently,

with a little start of recollection, she turned, and called softly "Clare!" stooping when she got no answer and peering through the curtains to satisfy herself that Mrs. Tregaskiss was asleep. She stopped singing, and moved about very quietly in her preparations for rest. When the candle had been blown out again, there was a silence, and Clare, opening her eyes, beheld Gladys, sophisticated, cynical Gladys, kneeling in her nightdress at the side of her bed, and saying her prayers as humbly as any innocent child. The sight wrung Clare's heart anew, and brought home to her, with a startling reality, the ghastly incongruity of her own position. Gladys was praying—no doubt for Ambrose Blanchard and for herself—praying that a blessing might attend their love, praying out of the fulness of her heart, and in the conviction that there was nothing in it unworthy to be brought before the High Throne. Oh, how crooked, how wrong it all seemed! That Gladys might thus pray—Gladys whom death had freed, and that she, Clare, who loved no less, but more absorbingly, and no less purely,—for love which has its root in the affinity of souls must, she told herself, be pure,—she who was separated from her husband by as hideous a gulf as even death could make, might not put up a petition, unless it were for strength to renounce what seemed then dearer to her than heaven, strength to keep her true to what had become an unnatural duty.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"TURN AGAIN, FAIR INES!"

Husband and wife exchanged no word in private on the following morning. They were all to start for Lake Enngella at ten o'clock, and everybody was busy preparing for the camping-out. The yard was full of horses, saddles were being seen to, pack-horses loaded, valises strapped up, and rations given out.

Tregaskiss came in late for breakfast, and was met by jocular upbraiding from the Gulf traveller for having spoiled his night's rest.

"You never saw such a chap, Mrs. Tregaskiss, for I'm sure he doesn't play on those larks when you are by to keep him in order," said the Gulf man, with ill-timed pleasantry. "Backed himself against each of us for a round with the gloves by moonlight, which was too much of a good thing at getting on for morning. We compromised on break-downs—didn't you hear us up at the house? Then I'm blest if he didn't start on the 'Sick Stock-rider' when we were all ready to turn in, and led the chorus in a way that moved us to tears. I could never have given him credit for so much sentiment, but it was after the grog had been finished up, wasn't it, Tregaskiss? Looks a bit seedy this morning, don't he? I say, Martin, we shall be having the bishop down on us for those break-downs."

"The bishop wasn't there," said Martin. "He cleared off to his own camp before we began to get rowdy. He wouldn't have a bunk in the quarters, Geneste, but said that as he was going to camp out to-night, and had been

camping out for the last three weeks with the timber cutters, he'd as well not make a change."

Though Tregaskiss certainly looked haggard and out of sorts, he still seemed in wild spirits. He laughed and bragged and rollicked with Ning,—making a show, which was almost ostentation, of his devotion to the child,—and except that he avoided looking at or addressing his wife, no one would have suspected from his manner that there was any family discord.

Helen had got into a way of looking below the surface of things, and guessed that there had been a serious disagreement, while Mrs. Hilditch had already learned that when Tregaskiss was in a peculiarly irritable and rasping humour in private, it was his custom to exhibit in public a boisterous geniality. In this mood Tregaskiss seemed to find a certain excitement in making a quarrel with his wife —he was like a dog worrying a bone in the way that he harped upon a grievance. His grievances were always of a petty nature—not worth having a row about: the cooking of a dish, the delinquencies of a black boy or stockman, some small domestic neglect, or a difference of opinion on the subject of Ning's bringing up. Gladys concluded that his bone, in the present instance, had been Clare's objection to the long ride for the child. There had been some talk about it at dinner the previous evening, and Geneste had then proposed that he should drive Ning the first ten miles in his buggy, till the road became impassable for wheels, so that the day's journey might be made easier.

The child, dressed in her little riding-habit, sat by her father's side, and was injudiciously fed by him with all the dainties the table showed forth. Mrs. Tregaskiss went to her room to finish her packing, and though Geneste had seen by her face that something was terribly wrong, he had no opportunity of saying a word to her before they started. Clare was riding his horse—the one he had lent her for the ride to the Carmodys' on that melancholy

return from Brinda Plains. She attached herself to the Gulf man as being the least likely of the party to notice her altered manner, but when the buggy came to a stop at a crossing which was only possible on horseback, and Ning was mounted on her filly, the party reconstructed itself. The track now became tortuous and steep, and the riders were obliged to go in single file, or else in twos, which often lost sight of each other among the trees. It was wild country through which they were passing. A little beyond Darra station the plains had been left behind, and the grassy valleys and wooded slopes, through which they had come during the first few miles, ended when the buggy turned back again. Now they were among barren ranges, sparsely timbered, sometimes along a bit of level road, or a tiny flat, where huge ant-beds of brown clay were scattered about like gigantic heaps of caked mortar left by an army of departed workmen; boulders of rock lying here and there, like rough-hewn pillars, helped the illusion. Sometimes they went by a shelving siding, with red cliffs rising above their heads, sometimes down a rocky gorge or the course of a gully where the long-bladed grass grew rank and brown, and sometimes they would mount a precipitous incline which obliged them to lean forward and grasp the horses manes to keep their seats. Fortunately all were good riders, even Mrs. Hilditch's horsewomanship being beyond criticism.

She was riding a good way ahead—just behind the black boys—with Ambrose Blanchard. Both were in light vein. Gladys' laugh rang out above the whirring of the locusts, and Ambrose every now and then would troll back a yodelling note, or a line from an Australian song. These two seemed to have made a temporary truce with doubt and regret, and to have resolved upon taking the good of to-day without reference to the possible ill of to-morrow. Geneste and Mrs. Tregaskiss followed them. Behind came Helen and Harold Gillespie, and she was trying to keep

Mr. Shand and the Gulf traveller within earshot, to stave off the sentimental interview which she knew Gillespie had in his mind. The others were "dodging about," as Martin put it, the little Cusack girls and the young men making short excursions after kangaroo, jumping convenient logs, and riding tilt at hanging blossoms, and otherwise bringing on themselves the reproach of taking too much out of their horses. Tregaskiss joined sometimes in the romps, but more often loitered with Miss Lawford in the rear of the rest. He was smoking continuously all the time, and got off occasionally, and on the pretext of tightening his girths took a pull at his flask.

As the noonday heat quenched frolicsomeness, voices grew subdued, and only the beat of the horses' hoofs sounded among the murmurs and rustlings and whirring of the bush. Gladys and Ambrose talked in a soft undertone of all the pleasant things under heaven. He had said to her as yet no further word of love, but she knew that she was forgiven for the past, and that her companionship was a joy to him. No allusion was made to Felmarshes or to poor dead Ironside; a tacit agreement seemed to have been made between them the previous evening that the past was to be buried. Yet now Gladys turned suddenly to him and said impulsively:

"Mr. Blanchard, will you tell me whether you are glad or sorry that I came out to Australia?"

"Do you need to be told?" he answered. "Don't you know that I shall never cease to bless that night of the fire at Brinda Plains. I am sorry for the sake of the company, which will give fewer dividends this year, that there was a fire, but I am wicked enough to be glad for my own."

He paused, and got suddenly red. He had been thinking only of those blessed moments when he had held Gladys in his arms, and poured forth into her unconscious ears the love which filled his heart. Were they quite

unconscious? He had fancied a faint pressure of her inert arm that lay loosely upon his shoulder—and then he remembered that he had had no right thus to take advantage of her helplessness, and added awkwardly: "I mean that I can never be thankful enough to you for showing me a part of yourself which I had never understood before."

"That would have happened just the same if there had been no fire," said Gladys, with some archness; "and the poor shareholders would not have lost their dividends." Then both were silent for a minute or two, and then Gladys began again a little tremulously: "You must always think badly of me,—as I used to be in the old days,—but tell me that you won't think quite so badly as you did before. Tell me that, at any rate, you believe in my sincerity toward you."

"I believe in it entirely, and I thank Heaven for it!"

"We are friends, then,"—and she half reined in her horse and stretched out her hand to him across the pommel of her saddle,—"friends as we used to say we meant always to be, in those far back days at Felmarshes."

He took her hand in his, pressed and released it, and though he said not a word, there was a look in his eyes which made Gladys' heart thrill.

"Promise me, then," she went on, "that from to-day you will begin afresh with me, and that you will forget all the cruel thoughts you have been keeping of me in these years. Tell me that you will think of me now as one who, having made a bad mess of her life at the start, wants to try and make as good a thing as she can of it for the end."

"Don't!" he exclaimed impetuously. "It's hard on me when you know that I must always stand out of your life, and that it would be happiest for me if I could bring myself never to think of you at all—or only as a beautiful dream. The end!"—and he gave a dreary little laugh,—

"why do you talk of the end, when you are at the beginning and have the whole world before you, and everything it can give you in your power?"

"Have I?" she answered wistfully, and laughing drearily, too.

"You have youth, money, intellect, charm, sympathy, opportunity, and—freedom. Doesn't that mean that everything is in your power?"

"Everything in my power!" she repeated. "Except the two things which at present I want most to be able to do."

"What are they?"

"I will tell you one. I should like to make Clare Tregaskiss happy."

"Ah, I am afraid, indeed, that would be out of the power of anyone but a magician, unless all the conditions of her life could be altered."

"I would be a magician, and all the conditions of her life should be altered. I would sweep away everything—everybody. Her husband, Ning, the baby, the Leura. I don't mean that I would do anybody any bodily harm. I would simply arrange things so that nothing of all that existed; so that Mr. Tregaskiss had never met Clare and so that he were married to somebody else who suited him better—say Miss Lawford. If one were a magician it would be so easy, and a little juggling and annihilation more or less wouldn't matter."

"If you swept away the Leura, as you say, you would be annihilating a good many more people than Keith Tregaskiss and his children. For one thing," he added shyly, "you would be sweeping away—me."

"No, I should have worked my other will by that time; you would not be here."

"Will you tell me, Mrs. Hilditch, what you would do with me if you were a magician?"

Gladys hesitated and blushed a little. "If I were a

magician," she said softly, "I would put you at home again, in your rightful place—not a clergyman; oh, no, but reconciled to your father and making a better sort of career for yourself than helping to cut down timber to rebuild the Brinda Plains Company's woolshed and carrying rations to shearers."

"Perhaps," he said gently, "that would be doing me a more cruel kindness than if you were to leave me here on the Leura to my timber-cutting and ration-carrying. Setting everything else aside, in England I should always be tormented by the tantalising vision of a happiness which honour, conscience—all right, manly feeling—must make it impossible for me even to think of."

"Why impossible? If—if one chooses, everything is possible."

"You told me yourself a moment ago that your own dearest wish was an impossible one. Gladys," he cried, "you must know what I mean. You must know that to see you free, courted, and to love you as I love you with absolutely no hope of winning you, would make life near you a hell to me. I had far better rot my days out completely beyond reach of you on a Western sheep-station. There could be no opportunity then for jealous longings."

"But if," Gladys said falteringly, "if I preferred staying on the Leura, to going back to England—if, having tried what civilisation and money and all the rest could do for me, I had found it dust and ashes, and so determined to give the whole thing up, and settle in a purer, freer atmosphere——"

"Oh, yes!" he interrupted. "Among the mosquitoes and snakes and scorpions and blacks, with droughts and strikes and fires for agreeable interludes in the summer heat!"

"You may laugh, if you please, but I meant what I said!" she exclaimed hotly. "I don't mind droughts and heat and mosquitoes; and as for strikes and fires—they are

very agreeable excitements. Yes, if I were to buy a station of my own, I dare say my trustees would advance me the capital——"

"On your solemn undertaking not to marry again," he interrupted a second time.

"It does not seem that I shall need to give that," retorted Gladys bravely. "The men who care for me are either too mercenary or too cowardly to take me without my money—which I hate!" she added passionately. "Yes, I hate it! I hate my money. It has come to me in an unworthy way; it is the price of everything that should have been dearest to me—the price of my degradation. It clings to me, and clogs me, and prevents me from throwing off all the dreadful past, and beginning a new, good, happy life, with no falsehood or pretence—the sort of life to make you glad, Ambrose, that you have known me. Ah, you don't believe that I am capable of living that life!"

"I believe you capable of everything that is noble," he said huskily.

"And yet you won't help me; you let my wretched money stand between us!"

"Yes," he said, shutting his lips tight for a moment in desperate determination, "your money stands between us, and always must."

"And," she went on, "what shall you say if I do buy that Leura station, and plant myself near you? Unless you run away to England, then you can't put yourself out of my reach."

"It is not possible that you can be so cruel?"

Gladys laughed. What did she care about anything in the world now that he had told her he loved her? The rest would come right, *must* come right, since she was a woman who knew her power, and he was no more than human.

At her laugh, Blanchard spurred his horse, and, purposely to avoid betraying himself further, made a dash

through a belt of gidia to where a native creeper hung its wreath of blossoms over the shattered limbs of a tree which had been destroyed by a stroke of lightning. He gathered a bunch of the flowers, and brought them back to Gladys.

"They are very sweet," he said, in his ordinary tone, "and not common about here. We haven't so many sweet smelling things on the Leura when the sandal-wood is out of bloom. You will see that the vegetation of the hills is a little different from that on the plains. What are they shouting about, I wonder?" he added, as the black boys with the pack-horses, who had drawn up a little way ahead, sent out one of their long, peculiar blacks' cries. "I suppose that we are in sight of the lake."

Tregaskiss pressed past them, trotting, leading Ning by the bridle rein. The child was tearful with fatigue.

"There's a plucky one, Pickaninny!" he shouted. "Come along! we're close up to camp. Now, Mrs. Hilditch, lay on like blazes to your horse's mane, and take a lesson from Ning; we've got to get up to that place."

"That!" Gladys looked in wonder at a steep ridge, with a razor-back top rising quite abruptly from the more gentle slope they had been mounting. The side was almost a precipice, and gave the effect of a natural wall, blocking their way. The growth of stunted gidia parted below the cone, and she saw that the range fell away on either side as though it had been cut, and that to right and left were deep impassable gorges.

"Are we at the end of the world?" she asked.

"We are close up to the top of the range, and over it is the camp I said I was going to bring you to," replied Tregaskiss. "Look out there, Shand, confound you! Just you take a back seat with the new chums for a bit. I'm boss of this show, and just don't any of you come in front of the Pickaninny. I promised her that she should have the first sight of the lake, and Miss Lawford is to come

next ; and d——n it, I'm going to keep my word ! Come along, Hetty ! "

The governess, who had been following close behind Ning, gave a half-ashamed, half-apologetic laugh.

" You mustn't mind Mr. Tregaskiss, Mrs. Hilditch," she said awkwardly ; " he is so excited at having found such a nice camp, that he has forgotten his manners. Please go first."

Gladys reined in her horse and looked at Miss Lawford with the calm air of aloofness, saying with formal courtesy: " No, pray follow Mr. Tregaskiss."

Miss Lawford blushed deeply, and gave another hysterical giggle.

" Oh, it was only on Ning's account that I've kept forward ; the child has set her heart on getting the first sight of the lake," she said.

Gladys made a frigid bow, and pointedly drew back. Miss Lawford switched her horse, and taking a zigzag line mounted fearlessly after Tregaskiss. She was a magnificent bush rider, and her little lithe body swayed with every movement of the animal. Tregaskiss turning round, called out : " Well done, Hetty ! " His rough ejaculations, as he dragged at Ning's bridle, and encouraged the filly to flounder forward, reached Clare below, as in some anxiety she watched the child's ascent. The climb was a stiff one, and would have frightened a timid rider. Helen Cusack, who, though she was a bush girl, had never gone after stock, or sat a pig-jump, far less a buck-jump, shrank a little. It was Geneste who turned back and, seizing her bridle, helped her to the summit. Mrs. Tregaskiss, with set lips, and hard eyes, dashed on ; she was in the mood to ride up a precipice, without caring whether the chances were in favour of her reaching the top, or being dashed to the bottom.

The first cry of delighted surprise at the view below came from Ning : " Oh, the sea ! the sea ! " she called out,

unconsciously echoing the shout of the Ten Thousand. There lay the lake, a great silvery sheet ; its opposite shore only dimly visible—a shore of low, hazy mountains, like clouds upon the horizon. A faint breeze tossed the waters into miniature wavelets, and brooding upon them were immense flocks of wild ducks, black swans, and different kinds of gulls, while on the sandy beach, strange, ungainly looking pelicans swelled their huge gullets and preened their long curved beaks.

The cone on which they stood was at the bend of a curve, and beyond the gorges on each side of it the range sloped down from its razor-back summit in long gentle undulations, cut here and there by deep furrows, with green pasture in the openings at the foot of the gullys. Myriads of parrots shrieked and chattered in the gum trees, which grew almost to the lake shore. In many places patches of sand, standing out in the water, showed how shallow the lake was, and told them that in another month of drought it would probably be quite dry, and that the mirage might be seen.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"IT IS A PLEDGE."

The camp, which Tregaskiss had once dropped on by accident when out after stock, lay in the hollow of a rocky gully to the west of the cone, which, impracticable as it seemed at the first glance, was yet the easiest point where the range could be crossed. The gully was broken about halfway by a sheer precipice over which in rainy seasons there was a considerable fall of water. Now only a trickle made the tiniest cloud of spray upon a dark pool at the foot of the cliff. The pool, which was very deep, gave out a rivulet that watered a small plateau, well grassed, free from poison bush, the Western scourge, and closed in on three sides by the range, thus forming a natural paddock, whence cattle and horses could not easily stray. Behind the waterfall was a good-sized cave, and this, it was settled, should be turned into the ladies' sleeping-room, a tarpaulin slung across the entrance keeping out the spray, though now this was hardly necessary, and dry grass spread as a foundation for the blankets. It was an enchanting nook, its angle sheltered by the hills, its base debouching upon the low downs between the range and the lake, while the breeze from the water, caught as in a funnel, made it seem deliciously cool after the long ride among scorched, barren hills.

The riders had zigzagged down along what was scarcely a track, over stones and fallen logs, following Tregaskiss and the black boys, who were already dismounted and hobbling their horses when the rest of the party appeared. Ning, once off the saddle, had forgotten her fatigue, and

was now running hither and thither collecting sticks for the fire, and helping the black boys to gather grass. The black boys loved Ning, and it was funny to hear her chattering to them in her own queer mixture of English and blacks' language, and touching to watch how careful they were not to let her handle dead wood or go where there was a chance of her being bitten by a snake. The gentlemen turned to,—Geneste understood how to bivouac,—and very soon packs were undone, horses watered and hobbled, a fire blazing, the billies set on to boil, and the cave got ready for the ladies to unpack and settle their own belongings.

Helen and the Cusack girls, with Mrs. Tregaskiss, busied themselves there, and Gladys Hilditch looked on with deep interest while Shand and the Gulf man cut two clean squares of bark, put on each a heap of flour, and proceeded to mix and knead damper and johnny-cakes.

Gladys had declared that nothing would content her but a true bush picnic, and had insisted on quart-pot tea and a damper. Geneste had pleaded for johnny-cakes, for which Shand was noted, but the Gulf man swore by his damper, and Gladys had appointed herself umpire in the competition.

The sun had nearly reached the range opposite when the damper was ready for its bed of ashes. Ning shouted that the sea was in a blaze, and the blacks' fires, lower down the valley, seemed indeed like sparks thrown out from the flaming trail across the lake. Ning wanted her mother to let her run down along the gully till she came to the sandy shore. She would not believe that there was any possibility of her taking a wrong turn among the spurs below the plateau, and that so getting out of sight of the water, she might lose herself among the gum trees. She wanted to look at the pelicans closer, to gather shells, to search among the black swans for the twelve white ones who were, she was sure, the bewitched princes of Hans Andersen's story. And there were other things that she

wanted more than to find the princes. To Ning, Lake Eungella was the scene of all the fairy stories. She had grown with the belief. It would have broken the heart of the imaginative child to be convinced that Andersen's people had no existence. Her mother read her Andersen's stories every night, and Clare herself had always a whimsical notion that they were real scenes and people somewhere. Tregaskiss had started the theory by calling out, when Ning asked her troublesome question, "*Wundi?*" (Where), "Oh, over by Lake Eungella, Pickaninny!"

Unconsciously Clare had followed suit, and so Ning was firmly persuaded that along the shores of Lake Eungella lay all the wonderful countries of story-land, the region in which the Chimney-Sweep had wooed the proud Princess, the Palace by the Water where the poor little dumb Mermaid had sat at the feet of the Prince, the Garden of Paradise, the Cave of the Winds, and Ning's ultimate desire, the dwelling of that friendly witch who had pulled in Gerda's boat, and had petted her and made all the roses sink into the ground, lest they should remind her of Kay. Ning had always felt indignant with Gerda for running away from that delightful witch, with her wonderful hat, her cherries, and her good things, to whom little girls were so precious. Ning had cherished the secret determination that she would find that old witch, and tell her how sorry she was for her loneliness, and that here was another little girl who really loved her, and who, though she might not leave mummy and stay with her altogether, would come over as often as she could and play in that beautiful garden where the flowers told stories, and make up to her generally for the loss of Gerda. This determination, and these unselfish desires, Ning tried now to convey to her mother, who listened to the child's prattle with ears that hardly heard, and answered with lips which spoke mechanically: "Oh, child, don't talk such nonsense! there's no such thing as Gerda's witch."

Ning's great brown eyes stared at her mother in horrified reproof.

"Mummy, you tell Ningie that Gerda's witch sit down alonga Lake Eungella. Mummy, ba'al you tell a lie. Mine think it that very wicked to tell a lie."

"Yes, it's very wicked to tell a lie," assented Clare wearily, "but that isn't a lie: Gerda's witch is only in a story made out of a man's head."

"Mummy," persisted Ning stolidly, "you been say that Gerda's witch sit down close up Lake Eungella. Suppose not Lake Eungella, then wunli—where that sit down?"

"There's no such thing as Gerda's witch," repeated Clare.

Ning brooded for a minute. "Mine not believe that," she announced at last; then after another pause: "Daddy been tell Ning that Gerda's witch, and Hullabaloo, and Blue Beard, and all the rest, sit down alonga Lake Eungella. What for daddy tell a lie?"

"I don't know, Ning; go and ask him; don't tease!"

"Mummy, mine certain sure Gerda's witch sit down close up here. Last night Ningie dream—water like it this fellow water, rock like it this fellow rock." Ning waved her hand dramatically. "Mine see witch and garden, and little fellow house—that close up—over there. I show you the place, mummy."

"No, Ning! dreams are nonsense."

"In the Bible," affirmed Ning, with triumphant conviction, "dreams is true." Presently: "Mummy, will you come and find the witch?"

"No, Ning, I'm too tired."

"Mummy, will you come and find the witch to-morrow?"

"I shall be too tired to-morrow; we've got to get home."

"Mummy, you's always tired now. Ba'al you run about with Ning, ba'al tell Ning stories, or come and fish for craws, or look out for chuckies—what for?"

"I'm getting old, child."

"Then soon go bong, mummy," said Ning solemnly.

"Die," corrected Clare. "You mustn't talk blacks' language."

"If you go bong," pursued Ning reflectively, "then you go to heaven. No witches sit down in heaven. Mummy,"—persuasively,—"come now and find Gerda's witch?"

"No, I'm too tired,"

"Mummy,"—desperately,—"will you be tired in heaven?"

"Oh, go away, child! Go and find Auntie Gladys. Let mummy think."

"You's always thinking. Ning will think too."

The child put herself on a rock opposite her mother, crossed her little legs, put her arms round her knees as she had seen her father and the stockmen do, and, with a maddening pertinacity, fixed her big solemn eyes upon her mother's face. In that attitude she had a curious resemblance to Tregaskiss.

"Go away, child! don't sit staring at me like that. Mummy has got a headache; mummy wants to be quiet."

Ning got up very slowly and went away, throwing backward glances, weighted with the purpose still in her mind.

"Daddy much gooder to Ning than mummy," she said; "daddy will take Ning to find Gerda's witch." She paused a minute, impishly daring. "Daddy will let Ning go and find Gerda's witch," she flung back, compromising with her conscience, for Ning fully intended to seek for Gerda's witch whether her father would or no, and, when the prohibition did not come from her mother, as she expected, conceived herself free to carry out the intention, and darted down to the lower camp-fire, where Tregaskiss, the little Cusacks, and Miss Lawford had paused for a minute or two, in their stroll down the valley, to have a patter with the black boys.

To Clare Tregaskiss the child's importunate questioning

had been as the flutter round her head of some insistent winged thing, so absorbed was she in her own wretchedness, so beset by the reckless impulse to accept Geneste's offer, and to go away and be quit forever of the burden of her marriage and its responsibilities. During that long ride she had worked herself into a mood in which the children's images seemed no more than blurs upon a mental background of dreary despair, and herself and Geneste the only living realities. It was a relief to have the child gone. She knew that Geneste was waiting till they could be alone to come and talk to her; and she knew, too, that the interview would be a momentous one.

She was sitting some distance from the cave, in a sort of niche in the hilly wall which bounded the plateau. Here the rocks seemed to have been cloven by some ancient convulsion of the earth, and were bare and striated, with broad ledges, forming a gentle tier of natural benches. Upon one of these Clare had placed herself. Projecting in front of the niche, and scattered about the trough of rock, were some granite boulders which screened the hollow, so that no one at the camps would have seen easily that she was sitting there. She knew, however, that Geneste had been watching her, and would come and find her before many minutes had passed. Her heart beat fast, and her bosom heaved, with an inward sob, over her own pitiful condition. Her shoulder, where Tregaskiss had struck her, ached dully beneath her linen riding jacket, and reminded her of her trouble. She had not said a word to Geneste of the scene with her husband—had, indeed, bidden herself refrain from doing so; for, all through her resentment against Tregaskiss, there was the sense of having injured him, and a feeling of justice, which forced her to excuse him. But now she did not seem able to bear her suffering alone, and had the longing to tell Geneste, that a child might have who seeks sympathy from its mother after a blow.

The moon was not at its full, but was shining brightly, and the night was so still that every sound could be heard with distinctness, and seemed to send an echo down from the narrow end of the gorge: the clanking of the horses' hobbles and tinkle of their bells; the noise of the black boys at their camp; the drip of the streamlet into the pool; the guggling sound of water reptiles, and at intervals the curlews' screech and the answering howl of dingoes. Most of the party had wandered down toward the lake, the gentlemen carrying guns—Shand and the Gulf man on a business-like expedition after pelicans, Tregaskiss and Martin Cusack bound for a reedy water-hole near the shore, where were numbers of wild duck. Martin had gone on ahead, while Tregaskiss dallied with Miss Lawford and her young charges. Helen had tried to attach herself to the group, but they had shown that she was not particularly welcome, and Harold Gillespie, determined to say his say, had drawn her off. Gladys and Blanchard had disappeared.

Ning came upon her father at an inopportune moment. She had run after him, shrieking her request, as he turned from the black boys' camp. Tregaskiss only roared: "Stuff!" and "Don't let your mummy make a goose of you, Pickaninny!" to Ning's tale of Gerda's witch. "Go back and tell your mummy to put you to bed," he shouted; "I don't want you; it's time for little girls who have been on horseback all day to go to sleep."

Ning slunk back, wise enough to know that persistence would call forth orders that might not be disobeyed; but after a minute or two she followed the party some way toward the more open country, a small shadow in the moonlight, which was lost by and by among the gidia trees.

Geneste had gone in search of Clare.

"Mrs. Tregaskiss," he said softly; then, as he came closer, "Clare!"

He saw that she was alone. She turned upon him a

white, tragic face, and made a little movement signifying that he might come beside her. He leaped, as well as his stiff leg would allow, across the mouth of the ravine and into the shelter of the boulder against which she was leaning. "Clare," he repeated.

Still she did not speak, but stretched out her hand to his, and drew closer to him, with a helpless gesture which touched him to the heart. He could hardly restrain the longing to fold her close in his arms, and soften and soothe her with loving caresses. He did, however, resist it, and only stroked and kissed the appealing hand.

"Something has happened?" he asked; "I have seen it all day in your face. Why did you go off so suddenly to bed last night? I have been waiting and watching for a word, in a perfect agony of anxiety, but you would scarcely look at me."

"I couldn't," she whispered.

"Clare," he repeated, alarmed; "it is something very bad that has happened."

"Is it? I don't know. At moments I feel wicked enough to be glad, for it seems to release me."

His mind jumped at one conclusion, and yet was puzzled.

"Do you mean—you remember what I said—that you can get your freedom?"

"No; not that. I'm afraid to talk of it. I thought I wouldn't tell you, but I can't help it. Only don't say anything to tempt me. You know what you said—that day riding to Gunna-Warra. If you said it now, I might not be so strong as I was then. I might—fling everything up. I don't know what I mightn't do. I'm so lonely, dear. I am so lonely."

He could bear it no longer; she was in his arms, held fast and fiercely.

"No—don't!" she murmured, with an involuntary physical shrinking in the very joy of the embrace; "it hurts—I'm bruised and sore."

"Bruised!" he cried. "How? You haven't had a fall? Show me where."

She touched her shoulder, withdrawing herself. "Never mind; it does not matter."

He said nothing, but quickly, and with a doctor's deftness, unfastened her bodice and laid bare the white neck, with that purplish red mark, reaching from shoulder to chest, showing clearly in the moonlight. The cross, on its thin gold chain, which she always wore from a certain feeling of superstitious reverence, showed too, and reminded him of her vow and of the barriers between them. She, looking at him, thrilled at the sudden flaming of love and pity in his eyes, and at the set grim look of anger, which intensified the falcon-expression of his face. He examined the bruise very gently, and then, with a tenderness that set her sobbing, kissed the place again and again and again.

"He struck you?"

"Yes. He had been watching us—— You know——"

"But there was nothing——" Geneste interrupted quickly.

"No; it wasn't that. He did not accuse me. He—— I think he believes in me. That is what makes me have a mad longing to tear off the mask. Can't you understand?"

"Oh, my poor Clare! Yes, yes! Tear it off; fling it away! Isn't that what I am begging of you?"

"His grievance was senseless," she went on. "He said I was poisoning people's minds against him; setting you against him—*you*, and the child."

"He was drunk, I suppose."

"Not that exactly; he knew what he was doing."

"Oh!" exclaimed Geneste with contempt; "in a state of chronic alcoholism it is not so easy to make distinctions between drunkenness and sobriety. Well, surely this ends it—for you?"

"My married life in ended, certainly," she answered, in a dull tone.

There was silence for a few moments.

"And do you imagine that it will be possible for you to continue living under the same roof with your husband?" Geneste asked hardly.

"I cannot! I cannot! I told him that he made me hate him, and he said that he hated me; that I might go—to the devil, for all he cared."

"Well, then, take him at his word—that is what I implore. Go—not to the devil, as he puts it, but to love, peace, happiness, with me."

Her face and attitude seemed to tell of the wavering impulses, the tottering rectitude which would not stand against too severe a strain.

"But you know," she said weakly, "it is not all his fault. We were never suited to each other. In all our life together I have been in secret antagonism with him. Causes act and react under the surface—I know it. No matter how we may try to hide our thoughts and wishes, they go outside of us, and make a force which influences ourselves and others. He has *felt* things in me, though he couldn't reason about them, and though he trusted me. I have no right to blame him."

"Granted, to a certain extent. Yet I think you take an exaggerated view. We have talked of this before; and it does not alter the facts of the situation. You are what you are; he is what he is. You can't be harmonised by act of parliament. And your children, remember, are half of him as well as half of you."

"The children! Ah, dear Heaven! they are all that matters."

All that he said was pitilessly true. She remembered Ning's attitude and expression of a little while before, and how it had reminded her of Tregaskiss. She remembered her revolt at different times against the beings she had

brought into the world, because of those very traits and resemblances which declared that they were not wholly of her. She could have loved her children passionately if they had been Geneste's. Was she to blame because even nature was in conflict with the struggling maternal instinct, so much less strong than the other instinct. The ironic tragedy of the whole position came over her with a force that shook her into helpless sobs. Then Geneste seized his opportunity. She lay now quite unresisting in his arms, and gave herself up to the full beatitude of his caresses. At the moment it seemed to her that she did not care for anything in the world but the joy of his touch, the heaven of his kisses. Neither of them knew how quickly the time passed during those sweet interludes of silent contact, alternating with gushes of confidence. Love is so wonderful in its mystic blending of soul and sense—the physical so necessary, and yet so unimportant in the spiritual oneness. There was no more argument, no more entreaty, no more weighing of rights and wrongs, and of practical difficulties against ideal joys. Everything was taken for granted in that tender babble of love, of which the refrain ran, "We were meant by fate for one another."

It was getting late ; the moon dipped below mid-heaven. Coo-ees sounded in the gorge, and the stray shots which they had heard, unheeding, ceased. Now a very musical "Coo-ee !" was sent forth quite near. Clare knew it for the voice of Gladys, and started, reluctantly releasing herself from him. He would hardly let her go.

"Sweet ! Dear love ! Are you happy now ? Doesn't this convince you ?"

The old struggle began once more.

"If it were not for the children—the poor little children !"

"*His* children !"

Geneste's whole manner changed. He stood before her, strong and masterful, and with his eyes fixed fiercely upon

her face. The gaze seemed to force her to his will; she always felt that if he chose to look at her in a certain way, she must do whatever he pleased. She had never, in the case of any other human being, experienced this sense of weakness.

"Clare," he said, "I am going to put you to the test. I feel that this is the crucial moment in your life and mine. It will never come again, and I don't mean to let it pass now. Your marriage, as such, you say is ended. You know what your life with me would be; you know what it must be for both, apart. You know, too, the misery of the half-union—the beating against bars you put up, the pretence at obedience in keeping away from you, and the misery it has caused us these past weeks. We can't live like that; it must be the one thing or the other. Choose—now, to-night."

"Choose!" she repeated faintly.

"You must choose between your children and me—that's what it all comes to. I leave your husband out of the question; you owe him nothing. It is your children—his children—or me."

"You will leave me?" she asked.

"I have made up my mind to end the strain one way or the other, because I see the situation is impossible. If you refuse me, I shall go away from you forever. I shall suffer cruelly for months—years. You know that such a blow must alter the whole current of my life. But other men have had to bear such blows, and have lived on like other men. I am only 'just a man,' as you say,"—his voice had a bitterness of which she was very conscious; "I don't profess to have superhuman strength, any more than superhuman virtue. The wound will always be there, but in time it will become cauterised, and I shall get strong."

"Oh, you are strong now—horribly strong!"

"I shall get over it. One can endure the inevitable, you see I am taking the selfish view; I do so on purpose.

As for you, you will die if you go on here—die before many years are past, and be to me only a memory and a grave. It will be much better for you to die. I have already put this before you."

"I know it. I shall die—perhaps like poor Mrs. Carmody. Why do I call her 'poor,' I wonder? But I shall not be glad, as she was, when she was dying, that she had done her duty."

"No, you will not be glad. You will feel that you have sacrificed your own life and happiness, as well as my welfare, for nothing. But you won't do that, Clare." His whole manner changed from its deliberately hard, dictatorial tone, and again his voice became exceedingly tender: "You won't do that?"

"What do you want me to do?"

The words came from her as if forced by torture.

"I want you never to go home again. I want you to ride with me, when we leave this place, straight away to Port Victoria, where we can catch the boat to Sydney. I want you to have done with your old life forever. You will do it? Don't worry over small details and obstacles. Everything is arranged."

"You had planned this?"

"Yes—deliberately. I own it. I looked out the steamers before we left Darra this morning—after I had seen your face at breakfast. I have spoken, too, to Ambrose Blanchard, and he has agreed, in case of my being called away suddenly, to undertake the management of Darra. We shall ride on ahead on the home journey, and turn off by a short cut that I know, to a bush inn, where I have saddle horses in the paddock. By pushing forward, we shall catch the evening train to Port Victoria, and the boat south, almost before they realise here that we have gone."

The coolness and audacity of his plan were as a new force suddenly turned upon her, impossible to fight against. There was no resistance in her feeble protest.

"And if I do not go?"

"Then I shall. I am quite resolved, for your sake as well as for my own. I cannot live in your neighbourhood knowing what your life is, and knowing that I have no power to help you. You could not bear it, either; it would kill you and embitter me. I shall go as far away as I can from you, and try to blot this year out of my life—as much as it is possible for me to do so."

Again the coo-ee sounded, and Gladys' voice called: "Clare!"

Mrs. Tregaskiss moved from the boulder.

"I must go."

"Not till you have given me your answer. I *must* know. It is life union or utter separation, from to-night. Clare, which is it to be?"

He took her two hands, and they stood for several moments, the two pairs of eyes gazing into each other. Hers quailed; her form swayed to him, her arms went up round his neck. "I love you," she said.

"You will come?"

"Yes; I will come."

"Oh, I will never let you regret it, my love—my wife!"

"Now I am going," she said. "I have given you your answer; you should be content. From this moment I shall be a different woman, not the old Clare Tregaskiss any more. I will not hear Ning say her prayers to-night. To-morrow she will have no mother."

"Do not fear for her, Clare. If you believe in Heaven's providence, you should believe that she will be cared for."

She shuddered.

"What mockery! Do I believe in Heaven? Don't you know that I am disobeying the laws of my Church? It is better for me not to believe in Heaven's providence."

"Clare, is it a pledge? You won't change?"

"I won't change, and it is a pledge. Look here!" She fumbled at her neck and drew out the chain and cross.

"You know what I swore upon this. It was a false oath. If I believed in Heaven, I should believe that punishment would come upon me through my child. See what I am defying—for you. I've broken my oath, for love of you. I have no use for this any longer."

She tore apart the fastening of the chain, and flung the cross, with all the strength of her arm, out into the ravine. They saw it bound against a rock, take a fresh impetus, and bound again, disappearing in the cleft where no search would ever again find it. Then Clare spoke solemnly:

"It was my mother's cross. I swore upon it by my child's life and happiness. Now my oath is broken. I am a wicked woman, and I don't care, I don't care—because I love you."

CHAPTER XXX.

OUTSIDE THE CAVE.

Mrs. Hilditch was standing not far from the boulders when Clare emerged from the cleft in advance of Geneste. He and she both had the feeling of being detected criminals. The humiliation was horrible, and made Clare more recklessly determined to fling off falsities. Gladys had sensed the situation, and Clare's face confirmed her suspicions. She knew that there had been a critical love-scene, guessed that Geneste had persuaded Clare to run away with him. Gladys was so happy herself, that her whole being throbbed in sympathy with love, even though it might be of an illicit kind. She felt a guilty spasm of joy at the thought that Clare had determined to take the law into her own hands; and then, frightened at herself for being glad, Gladys resolved to fight, as far as she could, on the side of conventionality and the children. "Ah, the children! That was just all that mattered," Gladys said to herself, too.

"Clare," she whispered, "I have been looking for you. I am afraid Mr. Tregaskiss is angry at your being out so long. They've all come back; Helen and Miss Lawford have gone to bed; and I let Mr. Tregaskiss think that you were in the cave, too."

"That was very devoted of you, Gladys, to tell a lie for my sake," Clare answered, in an odd tone. "But I think we'll undeceive Keith now. We are not going to have any more lies—after to-night."

"Clare, do you mean——"

At that moment Geneste came up to them and said, in his self-possessed manner:

"I'm afraid it is very late, Mrs. Hilditch, and the fault is mine of keeping Mrs. Tregaskiss out. It's a lovely moonlight night, isn't it? I think I had better go to my camp now, and I hope you ladies won't find the cave very uncomfortable. Good-night!"

He shook hands formally with Gladys, but did not say anything to Clare. To Gladys, the omission was significant; to Clare, a recognition, on his part, of their new relation toward each other, and of her declaration that there were to be no more lies. He walked away in the direction of one of the camp-fires—the furthest, where Blanchard and Martin Cusack were sitting. Close by, the black boys lay wrapped in their blankets, having heaped their smouldering log with twigs to make a smoke against the mosquitoes. The horses had got as near the smoke, too, as they dared, and were whisking their tails and making the bells round their necks jingle as they jerked their heads. Beside the fire nearest the cave Tregaskiss, Shand, and the Gulf man were lounging, their pipes alight, their guns at their feet, and two or three dead pelicans and several brace of wild duck on the ground outside the tent. They were talking noisily, discussing the evening's sport, and Clare, as she walked close by, heard Tregaskiss say:

"By Jove! I'm sorry, now, I didn't let the Pickaninny come, it would have been a regular adventure for her, and would have cleared her head of that witch rubbish. She's kept too much at home, and stuffed with fairy tales and rot. I'm not going to have it any longer; she shall ride about with me, and my word! she'll soon be sitting a buck-jumper. There's not a seat on the Leura can beat hers."

"Where's Ning, Mr. Tregaskiss?" Gladys called out, not for the sake of information, but as something to say, that he might know they were near. Tregaskiss looked up and saw his wife. His face flushed with anger.

"So it's you at last!" he growled, with a scant ceremony. "I guessed you weren't in the cave. About time, isn't it, for decent folks to come in and go to bed. I sent Ning hours ago. But I suppose her mother was too well occupied to see after her."

"Ning always puts herself to bed, you know," cheerfully observed Gladys.

"And her mother hears her say her prayers!" sneered Tregaskiss. "The prayers went to the wall to-night. I hate d——d hypocrisy."

"Can't I do anything for you, Mrs. Tregaskiss?" cried Mr. Shand, coming forward and trying to create a diversion, in his usual clumsy fashion. "I beg your pardon, I'm sure! I didn't see you. Look at our bag! These pelican skins are going to be cured for trimming a dress, or cloak, or something, for Ning; it's awfully like grebe, isn't it? Oh, yes, the mosquito nets are slung up, Mrs. Hilditch, and I do hope you won't get much bitten. Good-night! Sure I can't do anything?"

And he left them in front of the tarpaulin which protected the entrance to the cave, having, as Gladys gratefully observed, covered their retreat.

Mrs. Tregaskiss pushed aside the tarpaulin. No light but that of the moon was in the cave, but it was sufficient to show the row of forms stretched on narrow beds of heaped grass and leaves, over which waterproof sheeting and blankets had been spread, though features could not be distinguished. She purposely avoided looking at the furthest recess, which, being partially screened by a projecting piece of rock, and so affording a little privacy, had been arranged by Geneste for Clare and Ning. It seemed impossible to Clare that she could spend the rest of that night by her child's side—the child whom she had foresworn an hour ago, and whom she would desert on the morrow. Something clutched at the mother's heart then, but she shook herself free from the thought of those help-

less babes, taking refuge in that of her pledge to Geneste. She would force herself to keep it; she would not expose herself to the chance of another struggle; she would abstain as far as she could from looking into her child's face.

She stooped and picked up a waterproof that lay near the tarpaulin curtain.

"I'm not going to sleep in there," she said, "it's too stifling. I shall lie down on the rock outside."

Gladys tried to dissuade her.

"Ning might awake and be frightened."

"There will be plenty to comfort her," said the mother, still in that odd voice.

Gladys took a blanket from her own couch, which was nearest the entrance.

"Well, you shall have this to lie upon. Come and we'll find a cosey place. But, oh, the mosquitoes! You will be eaten alive and made hideous."

"I'll tie my veil round my face," said Clare, and Gladys gave way, remarking that she supposed snakes were as likely to be inside as out. They found a hollow on the waterfall platform, sheltered on two sides, and with a rocky floor. Gladys spread the blanket and went back for an armful of leaves and grass. Clare sat down,—she would not lie,—saying she was not sleepy.

"Neither am I. And I've got something to tell you. I want you to know that I am very happy."

"I knew that already, Gladys."

"Oh, you couldn't help knowing! It's in my very self and comes out at the pores of my skin."

"And from your eyes, and in your laugh, and in the tone of your voice—since yesterday," said Clare.

"Ah, I only knew for certain last night. I don't deserve it. I've been so bad, I'm not worthy of *him*. But that's the beauty of love, Clare. It—it's like the salvation through Christ. Nothing matters—not even badness, for

love washes it all away. Oh, my dear, nothing matters but love, and money is of no account whatever!"

"You'll lose your money. Oh, no! I quite agree with you. That is not of the least consequence—if the love lasts."

"It will last; it has lasted without a shadow of change—in me, anyhow—since the first moment I saw him. And I was married then, and I suppose it was wicked of me to care for him. Well, I couldn't help it. And through all that time of misery and humiliation and loneliness, I knew that my only hope lay there. That was why I came out. I *meant* to make him marry me."

"And you have succeeded!"

"Not quite yet; but he won't break his word now that he has given it. I had to make him ask me. He fought hard against it; it was all my wretched money, and his pride, and to-night we fought a battle to the death over it, and I killed his pride, and he had to acknowledge himself conquered."

Clare pressed her friend's hand, but made no response. Gladys knew why she could not speak, and went on:

"Of course we shall be dreadfully poor, but I shall get him home, and then things will come right with his father. And I shall wait and save—I don't mind cheating Mr. Hilditch's heirs that way. And I've got a balance of nearly two thousand pounds, and we shall manage somehow, and I mustn't buy any more lace. Clare, darling, I want to thank you—to thank you with all my heart for having me here, and giving me the chance of getting near him, and of finding out that he did love me after all."

The women kissed each other.

"Clare," whispered Gladys. "Oh, my poor dear, I'm so sorry for you!"

"There's no need."

"Yes, there is. Do you think I don't know? You and I have been bound by the same chain, we've suffered in

the same way, and we both know the hideousness of it. Clare, there's nothing in the whole universe so good as love, and there's nothing in the world so immoral as living with a man you can't care for, when you love another man. Listen: If you were going away with Dr. Geneste to-morrow, and it wasn't for the children, I'd say you were doing right."

"And the children?"

Clare spoke as quietly as though the affair concerned another person, only the twitch in her voice betrayed her emotion. She admitted nothing. Gladys knew that she would not acknowledge her intention, but none the less was Gladys sure of it.

"The children make the wrong. Oh, it would be a crime—a cruelty to leave them! Clare! you are not meaning *that?*"

Clare made no reply.

"Think," pleaded Gladys. "He would marry again. Think of poor little Ning and the baby! And a stepmother—or worse."

Clare shuddered, but still said nothing.

"Clare," cried Gladys desperately, "you won't speak; you will tell me nothing; you are stone outside, but do you think I don't know that you are suffering tortures?"

"I am—suffering tortures. I want to end them."

"Oh, how can you fancy that you will end them by running away? The children will haunt you to your life's end."

Still silence. Gladys went on:

"Take them with you. Go, and live your own life; you are justified—if you go alone. But, oh, wait for that other love-life! Wait, anyhow, a few months—a few years. You don't know what may happen. Something, perhaps, which would put you in the right, and give you freedom. Don't put yourself in the wrong first. Go away if you like, but alone with the children."

"You forget that I have no money to live an independent life with."

"What does that matter. I have enough to help you."

"You forget, too," said Clare slowly, "that they are my husband's children, and that I have not the right to take them away from him."

Gladys made an impatient gesture.

"He would not dare to go to law."

"I can't enter into that. I suppose there's such a thing as moral right, and bad as I may be in some ways, I feel the justice of that. He loves Ning better than I do. What is natural instinct with him, is—has been only duty with me. Gladys," she added, "don't let us speak of that any more. You are a good woman, and a true friend, and I thank you with my whole heart. But you can't judge for me. I must choose my own path and go where it leads me."

She got up as she spoke from her leaning posture. It was a sign of dismissal. Gladys was not, perhaps, altogether sorry that for the time she must close the discussion. Clare had shut herself up in a chamber of reserve to which she could not penetrate. Gladys knew that Clare must be meditating some decisive step,—guessed, indeed, what the step was,—but had no idea that it was likely to be put immediately into execution. She could not run away with Dr. Geneste that night, at any rate, and Gladys was herself so physically weary, as well as so utterly happy in the glow of her new understanding with Blanchard, that she longed for rest, and for the silent watches in which she might assure herself of the reality of her joy.

"I see that you are tired out," said Mrs. Tregaskiss. "Go and sleep."

"I shall not sleep, but of course I am tired. You must be tired too, Clare. Won't you come and lie down beside Ning?"

"No ; I am better here."

"Are you going to stay here all night ?"

"Perhaps. But the morning can't be so very far off."

"I don't like to leave you, Clare."

"Why not ? It is my mania to enjoy being alone. Don't trouble about me. Go and rejoice, as I do, dear, too, in your happiness. Perhaps I shall be happy as well, some day—or when I am dead, like poor Mrs. Carmody. She did her duty and minded her children. And what was the use of it all ? Duty doesn't pay on the Leura. Good-night, Gladys !"

"Good-night, Clare !"

They kissed again. Gladys was turning away, but Clare stopped her for a moment.

"I have never pretended to be a good mother ; and you must take that into account. But I have done my best ; and I have always been dreadfully sorry for the poor little children. Oh, there's something horrible," she cried, "in their having to come into the world, whether they choose or no—the fruit of a marriage that's not the sacramental marriage we used to talk of in the old days. Oh, how different that would make it all ! Do you remember, dear, how we used to say to each other that we'd choose the highest—or nothing. Instead of that we both chose the lowest. Now we have found out our mistake; but you have been able to mend yours, and I haven't."

"You will—some day. You'll be happy, as I am, some day—able to be with *him*."

"Perhaps. Yes, probably I shall be with him, some day. But that doesn't alter the fact that the poor little children were brought wrongly into the world. They are children of sin and shame ; worse off than if—— For when they've come through love, their mother must have a different feeling for them ; and that's just the wrong in me. Well, I suppose God knows all about it. He should care for them and put the wrong right, and raise friends for them

better than their wicked mothers. Gladys, I just wanted to ask you to think of that when—when you've got children of your own. I just wanted to say—— If anything should happen to me, and it ever comes in your way, you'll be kind, won't you, to my Ning and baby?"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE PENALTY.

THROUGH the hours Clare Tregaskiss remained half lying, half crouching in the hollow beside the cave. She had, in a mechanical fashion, prepared herself for the night, piling up against the wall of rock the leaves and grass Gladys had brought, thus making a sort of cushion upon which she reclined, the blanket spread over it and her waterproof covering her knees. The mosquitoes, having scant shelter of herbage just here, were not so troublesome as down on the grassy plateau, or perhaps she did not feel them. Anyhow, she untied the veil she had fastened round her head and face, and stayed during the night bareheaded, and with wide eyes staring out over the desolate bush.

The scene harmonised with her mood. It was her impulse always, when she was wretched or torn by rebellious longings, to make for the wildest and loniest spot she could find. To-night she was so physically exhausted and so wrought up mentally that she was barely conscious of material facts. She had a grewsome fancy of herself as one walking on the edge of a precipice, the pledge to Geneste her foothold, as it were, the thought of her children and of the life she was going to give up, typified in the black vacuum below, from which, to save herself, she must keep away her eyes and her mind, but which was always horribly present. Everything else was a confusion of sounds and of dim images, except the light of Geneste's camp, and the thrilling consciousness of that steel-like, invisible chain binding their two beings together. Sometimes Ning's solemn dark eyes would shine out of the gulf, and then she

would wince and totter, and in terror draw herself together and turn her own eyes inward. Sometimes she would fancy that she heard Ning's voice in its quaint half aboriginal utterances raised in accents of pain and distress, and at such moments would have difficulty in assuring herself that on the other side of the rocky wall Ning lay soundly sleeping.

It was not strange that uncanny fancies should have visited her, for the ghostly scene and the night sounds were enough to make stout nerves creep. The bush was full of weird gurglings and rustlings, and an impression of mystery and of the illimitable seemed breathed from among the desolate stretches, the moon-made shadows, the straight bare stems of the gum trees, the dark clumps of gidia, and the gray upheaved boulders. The "hop-hop" of wallabies came from among the fallen timber in the gorge behind her; there was the shrill chirrup of the tree frog, and there were throaty noises from nameless reptiles, making for the pool below the cave. Here some white-barked, crooked trees bent like ghosts over the water, upon whose inky blackness the moon cast a feeble ray, giving a new touch of dread to the scene. She could hear the heavy flapping of flying-foxes' wings; from the scrub came the dismal howling of dingoes, and nearer, the curlews' wail. That sound, which for a second she fancied to be Ning's voice calling "Mummy!" was from the native bear, which has a cry like a child. The moon went slowly down, and by and by she must have slept a little, for she woke to see that faint grayness on the edge of the sky which heralds dawn, and to hear the more-pork giving its early note, and the long derisive chuckle of the laughing jackass.

She watched the day break, heard the rousing of the black boys when they went after the horses, and then, stiff and aching, got up and stole round to the entrance of the cave. She fancied they might think it strange that she should have been out all night, and thought that she would

lie down and make a pretence of having slept like the rest. But the unconquerable dread she had of meeting Ning's eyes and hearing the child's prattle held her back; and, instead, she went down the rocks to a lonely pool, an outlet of the larger pool, where she washed, did her hair, and got rid of some of the traces of her vigil. The sun was quite up by the time she had finished, and she was mounting the rocks again when she heard a call from the cave, "Ning! Ning!" and then her own name in Gladys' voice, "Clare!"

She quickened her steps. Gladys met her before she reached the cave. The tarpaulin was drawn back, and Helen Cusack and her sisters stood before the entrance. Clare, in her dazed way, noticed that they looked alarmed.

"Have you got Ning with you?" Gladys asked. She spoke sharply, and her eyes had a frightened expression.

"Ning!" cried Mrs. Tregaskiss, startled. "No; I have not seen her. Is she not in the cave?"

"We can't find her," answered Gladys. "I thought you might have come in when we were asleep and taken her out."

"No; she is in bed," said Clare, turning white with an undefined fear.

"I don't believe she has been in bed all night," cried Gladys. "The blanket looks as if it had never been disturbed. There was a roll of waterproofs and things on it, and that made me think she was there. It was so dark in the cave; and I never looked closely."

The Cusack children joined in. They had been so tired that they had tumbled into bed without thinking of Ning. Miss Lawford spoke of how the child had begged her father to look for Gerda's witch with her, and how he had sent her back to bed. Not one of them had seen Ning since then; there were no traces of her in the cave: the obvious inference was that she had never been back.

As she listened, blackness came over Clare—the black-

ness of the inn at Cedar Hill, when she had wakened to the sight of Geneste. She tottered against the rock, and the blood seemed to rush away from her body. In a few seconds the blackness passed, her heart beat quickly, and a tingling came into her limbs as the blood flowed again. Gladys was supporting her, and Helen was at her other side. By a kind of divination she knew that some awful thing had occurred, and that she had called down a doom upon her child. Gladys and Helen heard her say, in a terrible sort of inward whisper: "God has punished me. He has killed Ning."

"Oh, Mrs. Tregaskiss! don't be frightened; it's sure to be all right, and I expect she is just playing round," said Helen. "Or perhaps she has gone to one of the other camps. I'll run and see."

Helen flew to the nearest of the camps, where Tregaskiss, just risen from his blankets, was rating a black boy for having let one of the horses stray. Shand, the Gulf man, and Martin Cusack were kindling a fire, and making preparations for the baking of johnny-cakes, while Geneste and Blanchard filled the billies with water.

"Ning! My good God! she's gone; and has lost herself!" cried Tregaskiss, horror-stricken, when Helen told him how the child was missing. "I sent her back to bed when we went shooting last night. I haven't seen her since."

It was the same story with all. No one had beheld Ning since she had called after her father, and he had told her it was time for pickaninnies to be asleep. Everybody who had thought about her at all, had supposed that she had put herself to bed, as was her habit at home. Those who had thought of her, upon going into the cave, seeing in the dim moonlight the bundle upon her blanket, in the recess, had imagined it to be Ning herself, coiled up in profound slumber. Besides, they had of course expected that her mother would be beside her. When Tregaskiss learned

that Clare had not slept in the cave, his mad anger knew no bounds. He uttered words which were not pleasant for bystanders to hear. Meanwhile the gorge rang with coo-ees, and calls of "Ning, Ning!" Miss Lawford, glad to escape from the scene between Tregaskiss and his wife, rushed with the Cusack girls, peering into impossible crannies. Helen and Martin searched more systematically round the plateau. Clare, herself, was like one upon whom a doom has fallen, and who knows there is no use in resistance. She bore her husband's reproaches with perfect quietness, not stirring a muscle, still and stony as though the nerves of hearing and sensation had been paralysed.

"Have you no feeling at all, that you stand there like a marble statue?" roared Tregaskiss, who had completely lost his head. "By G——d! if anything has happened to the Pickaninny through your neglect, I'll never speak to you or look on your face again. As for me, I'd as soon be dead and done for, as lose the Pickaninny!"

Geneste and Blanchard stepped up to him. Ambrose spoke first:

"Look here, Mr. Tregaskiss! it isn't as bad as all that; and this isn't the way to take it. Mrs. Tregaskiss is no more to blame than you or I, or any of us. The child will be found again all right, you may be certain; she has just strayed and lost herself, and we've got to lose no time in looking for her. Let's settle at once what to do."

"We had better divide into search parties," said Geneste. "Each one should take a black boy, except, perhaps, myself and Martin Cusack. He's a good tracker, and I'm used to it."

"I'll back Geneste to track a skitter across running water," cried the Gulf man.

Tregaskiss bestirred himself with feverish activity. Geneste took command, and presently the horses were saddled, and the search parties started. Tregaskiss foremost. Soon every person of that pleasure expedition was

scouring range, gullies, and flats, and lake shore for little Ning.

The ladies of the party and the new chums kept near the gorge and scoured the ground, going in line to and fro among the gullies, shouting as they went, but no answering call came, and there was no sign of the child. Then they went toward the lake, but to no avail. At one o'clock a black boy among the searchers struck a track for about ten yards on the old Eungella road, and then again, for about a hundred yards on a cattle-path,—just two tiny boot-marks,—but it was lost again completely. The tracks ran inland from the lake and were a long way from the camp, telling a pathetic tale of the poor baby's night wanderings. They made these tracks the point of a fresh start in all the directions round. Blanchard rode back with the news, and Gladys and Helen and even Miss Lawford wept with joy, for now they felt sure Ning would be found. But Clare did not shed a tear or give a smile, nor did she show any anxiety in putting together food and a blanket in which to wrap the child when they should come upon her. She had been walking aimlessly, her face a mask of despair, walking because she could not sit still, not with any hope.

"I know that Ning is dead," she said, in her stony voice. "There is no use in taking food, she will not need it. But I should like to have her little dead body, so that the dingoes and wild birds may not hurt it."

Her calmness was terrible; she did not shudder like the rest at the suggestion.

"Ambrose, I think she is going mad," whispered Gladys; "she never says a word, only walks, walks, with that awful set face. What can we do?"

"We will bring the child, please God, before many hours are over, and that is all we can do," he answered. "If only there were a station near where we could get search hands and fresh horses! There are so few of us. Geneste is tracking like a black fellow or a red Indian, and

Tregaskiss will not let the black boys stop for a moment, though he is so wild with grief that he is not of much use himself. The child *must* be saved if it is within human possibility."

He rode away again, and there were more interminable hours of waiting. All they could do still was to wander and shout and make fires on the hills, which should attract the little creature if she were hidden in one of the ravines near. No one came back that night from the outside searchers. The night was passed in that aimless wandering, and in broken snatches of sleep taken in relays, the watchers starting at cries of curlews or native bear, in the fancy that it might be the voice of the child. The country blazed with the fires they had lighted, and some went down to the lake shore,—the distraught mother among them,—and covered miles along the sand. But there was no Ning.

In the morning after the second night, Tregaskiss crawled up to the camp, lame, his feet cut by the stones through his boots, his hands bleeding, and his eyes wild and bloodshot. He had been tracking on foot by moonlight and had lost himself, till he had been able to strike the gorge at daybreak. Now he had come for one of the lady's horses, for their own were knocking up. Clare was still wandering by the lake shore, and perhaps it was well that she did not see her husband, for her heart would only have been harrowed the more. Helen and Miss Lawford brought him some damper and beef, and he ate it mechanically, taking no notice of either of them in words, but Helen fancied that he turned away from Miss Lawford with something like a shudder. He was curiously subdued, and there was an expression upon his face, in all its wildness, almost solemnising—a faint reflection of that look which Paul of Tarsus must have worn when he came back to Damascus blind. What had been his thoughts during those lonely hours no one knew, but Gladys partly guessed

them. He came up to her while they were catching and saddling Helen's horse.

"I don't want to see my wife," he said, "but you can tell her I'm sorry that I spoke to her as I did. I am as much to blame as she is for Ning's death. Yes, Mrs. Hilditch, Ning is dead." He fixed his eyes, with their strange spiritualised expression, on Gladys' face, and she wondered if this were in truth the old Tregaskiss, his features seemed to have so curiously sharpened, and all his bloated looks and coarseness to have disappeared. "She came to me last night, out in the bush," he went on. "I saw her as plain as I see you. She stood in front of me and held out her little arms and then she vanished. She held out her little arms——" he repeated huskily. "She was always fond of her daddy—the Pickaninny——" His voice broke altogether, and the great fellow gave a choking cry, and flinging himself forward with his head upon his arms, heaved and shook in an agony of uncontrollable grief. "I—I—can't bear it," he sobbed. "I doted—on the Pickaninny——"

Gladys sobbed too, it was as much at the sight of his grief as for the Pickaninny. He looked utterly broken, and she guessed that the enforced abstinence from stimulant for so many hours had something to do with his shattered condition. She brought him some brandy, but to her great surprise he took the pannikin and dashed it to the ground.

"No more of that for me," he said. "I've drunk my last drop of grog, and I'm done forever with it—and with other things too. Something came over me last night, Mrs. Hilditch, that has made a changed man of me."

Gladys wondered, but she did not speak. Tregaskiss got up and shouted with one of his old oaths to the black boy to be quick with the horse.

"She's dead," he murmured, "but I've got to find her. It kills me to think of my Pickaninny's pretty face, and

perhaps the dingoes——" Again he gave a great sob, and his hand and arm shook as he drew the reins tight in order to mount. "You may tell Clare," he said, bending down, "that I'm a changed man. Before Heaven, I mean it!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

"THE WORLD BETWEEN US."

Gladys had a good cry to herself. She told Helen Cusack what had happened, and the two looked for Clare, who was walking along the shore of the lake in a dreary, mechanical way, with a fixed vacant stare on the ground, which showed plainly that she had given up all hope, if, indeed, she had ever had any.

Later on, Helen came upon Miss Lawford lying, her face to the ground, in passionate tears.

Ambrose Blanchard rode into camp in the afternoon, faint, worn, and dispirited. The tracks had come to nothing, and there was still no trace of the child. He had been searching during the night as long as the moon lasted, and the others had gone forth again, but now all were becoming hopeless, and they had no expectation of finding Ning alive. Geneste, he said, had more than once struck tracks, but had lost them again. He had never stopped to sleep, eat, or rest. Fortunately they had met with a party of fencers, and had been able to get two fresh horses and more hands. One of the fencers had gone to give the alarm at the bush township of Eungella, and to call out the police. Ambrose came now to see how the ladies and the new chum in charge of them were getting on for provisions, and to consult as to the advisability of their making for Darra-Darra. They, too, were almost worn out, and Gladys was deeply alarmed for Clare, who kept always the same marble face, and did nothing but walk in that mechanical, chained-beast fashion. She would not hear, however, of leaving the place.

"I know that Ning is dead," she repeated, "but I will not go away till they have buried her."

Her composure was that of a mad woman, and Blanchard grew frightened also. Gladys was fretted to a shadow, but held out bravely, and smiled at him radiantly: happiness is an effective spur to heroism. Helen, too, though her pretty freshness had gone, was self-collected and grandly devoted, taking turns with Gladys to watch, if from a distance, poor distraught Clare.

It was hysterical little Miss Lawford who showed the white feather. She wept profusely, and wildly entreated to be taken home. What was the use of her staying? She could do no good to poor little Ning. She was dying of terror, and she knew that Mr. Tregaskiss had turned against her, and blamed her for the loss of the child. She had done nothing, she declared, to be treated so. Mrs. Cusack would be uneasy, too, about the children, and what was to hinder their being murdered by blacks in that lonely, unprotected camp? Might they not have a black boy, or one of the gentlemen who knew the way, and be taken to Darra-Darra?

"You know the black boys are more valuable than any of us as trackers," said Blanchard. "I wish to Heaven we could spare somebody," he added, in an aside to Helen, "and get rid of her." Whereupon Helen, roused to gentle wrath, rebuked the governess so sternly for her selfish want of consideration that Miss Lawford retired abashed, shrieking that no one knew what she was suffering and how her heart was broken, and hid herself in the cave, where she gave way to a prolonged bout of sobbing. By what she called afterward a "miraculous coincidence," deliverance came just after Blanchard had gone, in the shape of her old admirer, the land commissioner, who, having heard the sad news from the fencer on his way to Eungella, had left the men with him to help in the search, and at Geneste's instance had hurried on to the camp.

Gillespie came with the commissioner ; he was not a good enough bushman to be of great service to the seekers, and not in health for continued exertion and hardship. He had a word of good news. Two black boys from Eungella, who were noted trackers, had joined the party ; they had found a clue in the shape of some remnants of Ning's garments, and one little boot, and it was probable that the end was now near.

The land commissioner saw his opportunity, and seized it. Woebegone and dishevelled as she was, Miss Lawford seemed to him more attractive in her pleading helplessness than when confident and tricked out in her showy finery. He was thrilled to the heart by the way in which she clung to him. He was a good bushman, and knew the road, and there was no reason why he should not escort her and the two Cusack girls to Darra-Darra at once. Helen indignantly refused to accompany them ; but though Minnie and Tottie rebelled, and protested that it was cowardly to leave the others in their distress, this was obviously the wisest course, and so the commissioner had the horses saddled, and the four rode away, to the relief of those who remained.

That afternoon nature asserted herself. Clare fainted in her restless tramp, and was for a long time unconscious. About sundown the thud of horses' feet sounded in the gorge, and one by one, winding down the range, a straggling line of riders appeared. Geneste, torn, unshaven, bent, having become, as it were, an old man in those three days, was foremost. He carried no burden ; there was not a coo-ee uttered, and the silence and his miserable face told Helen, who saw them first, only too surely that the search was ended, and that Ning would never come back again.

She ran to meet him ; she was practically alone in the camp, for Clare Tregaskiss was lying in a half stupor in the cave with Gladys watching her, and Harold Gillespie,

had gone upon a last despairing hunt in the crannies of the gorge. Geneste dismounted at the foot of the range, and tried to meet Helen, but he staggered against a rock, and she saw that he was completely exhausted and unmanned. No wonder! Apart from the anxiety and remorse he had been enduring, he had not taken off his clothes, had not slept, and had scarcely eaten for two nights and three days. He could hardly speak, but clasped Helen's hand as though he found comfort in the pressure.

"How is she?" he asked presently.

Helen knew whom he meant.

"She fainted, and seems only half conscious now. She walked and walked, all day and night. I thought she would go mad. Perhaps this is the best thing for her."

"Yes—if one could keep her unconscious. My God!" he groaned, "it's too horrible!"

"The child?" Helen asked. "She will not go away from here till they have brought her."

He gave a convulsive shudder. "We had to bury her. It's too horrible—I can't tell her. She mustn't know. Can't you understand? We couldn't bring *it* here. Death must have come the second day. We think it may have been a snake bite. The body——" He broke off, shuddering again. "I'm a strong man," he said, "and as a doctor I've seen bad sights, but this one has utterly knocked me over, and you must forgive me."

Helen was crying. The other men who had followed Geneste kept back. They had dismounted some little way off, and now quietly led their horses down the plateau to avoid startling the miserable mother by the sounds of their return. Helen looked for Tregaskiss; he was not among them. Geneste answered her unspoken question. "The father? We left him—at the grave. He was stretched out upon it; he would not move—calling out for his 'Pickaninny.' I,"—he gave a sort of gulp,—"I never in all my life felt so sorry for another man as I felt for

Tregaskiss. And I never," he added in a lower tone, turning away, "I never so hated myself."

They walked down to the tent. "I want to try and get a little more like myself," he said wearily. "I—I have something to give her. All that is left of the child. Helen, I think you must know what I feel—what she feels? The sting of it! It's best that she should hear the worst from me. God help me to comfort her!"

A revulsion that was terrible in its intensity came over Helen. Her heart had so gone forth to him! She had so pitied him; she had longed like a sister to console him! In the tragedy of these last days, she had almost ceased to think of him as Mrs. Tregaskiss' lover. And now—the thought of the father stretched on his child's grave; the remembrance of what Gladys had told her of his declaration that he was a changed man; and then the picture of the wife, the bereaved mother consoled by—her lover! It was too jarring; it was against nature. Such things had no right to be. And through it all she loved him; and she had something of the inconsistent mother element mingling with the love element that there is in every pure woman, toward the man of her heart; the mother-longing to guard and snatch him from sin and danger. At that moment she would almost have laid down her life to save Geneste from Clare Tregaskiss.

He felt the revulsion in her as she abruptly moved from his side.

"Ah, you don't understand! You think it abominable."

She did not answer.

"It's all wrong," he said. "Yes, I know that. I've no right to expect that you would understand; you are too good for that kind of thing."

She left him without a word.

Clare Tregaskiss was sitting in the cave when Geneste came into it. Gladys had met him at the entrance, and had left them to be alone together. Clare was sitting on a sort of

couch they had made for her of piled up blankets and leaves, in the recess where she and Ning were to have slept. The light, subdued by the half-drawn tarpaulin, and screened from her by a projecting piece of rock, was so dim that at first he was hardly able to see the ravages which those awful days had made in her. Then, as he came closer and looked into her face, he was filled with a compunction so vast and overwhelming, that for the moment it swallowed up the sense of their relation to each other, and all the more personal part of his love, so that there seemed no room for any emotion but that of immense pity. Her look terrified him. The lips were set in a travesty of her old still smile; her features were pinched and bloodless; her eyes stared and burned out of red sockets. She was perfectly calm, but it was the calmness of frenzy.

"I am glad you have come," she said, as though she were receiving an ordinary visitor. "It is quite fitting that you should be the one to tell me of my punishment, since it is through you that it has fallen upon me."

Her manner frightened him. He made an inarticulate exclamation, and half stretched out his arms, but he dared not approach nearer.

"You see," she went on, "God has dealt me the full punishment. It is not only that he killed Ning, but he has given her to be devoured by the wild beasts, so that there is nothing of her I can keep, even in memory. I can never think of her poor little face and her pretty soft limbs without—seeing——"

Her voice hardly faltered, but a spasm of the muscles prevented her utterance. She closed her eyes, and for a moment he saw a wave of shuddering horror pass over her tense features. He groaned in anguish at her agony.

"Oh—how——" he began, and then could not put into words what she had divined.

"No one told me. I knew. That's what I was waiting

for. I said to myself that if God gave me back the body of my child, it would be a sign to me that I should be forgiven. But you see, there is more to come. I swore by my duty to my children. I have broken my oath, and I must pay the full penalty."

"Clare, my poor darling. Your mind is unhinged by sorrow. You must not look upon this terrible thing which has befallen us in that light. Surely God is not less merciful than man. This is not retribution; it is not punishment for sin. There was no sin. The accident must have happened——"

"Do you know how it happened; there was no accident in it." Her eyes through the dimness were like fires scorching him. "I was sitting there waiting for you. I was thinking of you—only of you. I would not listen to the child; I would not look at her—she reminded me of her father. I told her to go away. My last words to her were angry words. Oh, dear Heaven! did she think of them when she called out to me in her wandering that night! I put her out of my mind, and you and I talked of our love. Perhaps she was hesitating then whether to go on further. Perhaps while you held me in your arms, and we kissed each other, she was saying to herself, 'Mummy doesn't want me.' *I didn't want her!* I was going to leave her altogether. It was my thought that determined her to wander on. Our thoughts *are* forces to move people. When I gave you that promise and threw away my cross, I made it impossible for her to turn back. She'd have come back if I hadn't thrown away the cross. She'd have been saved if only I had gone into the cave, for I should have missed her—if I had only repented and gone in. But I wouldn't go, because I was a guilty woman, and I didn't dare to look into my child's innocent face. You know I sat outside all the night. And I wouldn't let myself think of her; I wouldn't listen when she called to me—I could hear her calling, and I told myself it was the

curlews. I hardened my heart. And I am a wicked woman ; and God has punished me."

She rose to her full height as she spoke, and lifted her arms in a tragic gesture which told of the extremity of despair. Again he was reminded of that gesture and wild cry out in the lonely bush night, "How long, oh, God ! How long !" which seemed to him somehow the very keynote of Clare's inner life. This gesture appeared to him one of dismissal—of repudiation ; it awed him into silence. He could not go close to her, or even speak her name. He had a fancy, just then, that she was not so much a woman to be loved and comforted, as a Fate announcing her own doom. She went on, her voice like metal dropping, never raised, but startling in its intensity.

"Now, go ! I don't want ever to you again."

"Clare !" he cried. "Not like this ! Oh, my darling, don't send me away like this !"

"Yes, go!" she repeated imperiously. "What is the use arguing and pleading ? That will not change me. What's the use of piling on agony, either ? How else do you want me to send you away ? It won't make it easier to tell you that I love you. Do you need for me to tell you that? Haven't I done what proves it. Haven't I offered up my child, and given myself to be accursed, for love of you ? That's enough. I've sworn that never, as long as my husband lives, will I touch your hand again or willingly see your face. I shall not break *this* oath. So—good-bye !"

He stood silently imploring.

"Oh, go, go !" she cried again. "Don't you hear me ? You'll drive me mad, standing there. Don't ever let me look at you again—that's all I ask ! Put a barrier between us, that neither can ever get over. Put the world between us—that would be best of all."

"I will obey you," he answered. "Your will shall be my law, as I have always told you. You shall not be troubled by me. Good-bye—my dear,—my dear ; and

may God help you in your misery! May he help us both!"

He turned from her without another word, but paused and came back for a second, laying on a rock close by her something folded in a white handkerchief. The corners of the handkerchief fell apart and showed a child's little stained sock, a tiny discoloured boot, and a mass of dark brown curly hair.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

It is the privilege of novelists and dramatists to draw the curtain strings at the climax of a situation, and let the drop scene fall when emotions threaten to overpass the conventional limit. Real life, however, does not provide such convenient mechanism, and the human tragedy allows its performers no intervals of, so to speak, annihilation. Clare Tregaskiss had to live through days and weeks of dull, hopeless pain, the climax passed, the tragedy played to the dying point, and then nothing left but the suspension of nerves and faculties in an aching blank of inaction. She was fortunate in this, that though the suffering was acute, all through the inaction, memory seemed, when it was over, to wipe and sponge out parts that had been most terrible. Looking back afterward, she never knew how she had got through the journey from the gorge to Darra-Darra, and thence, in Geneste's buggy, driven by Ambrose Blanchard, to her own home. She had refused to stay at Darra, and Geneste, in obedience to her command, had not accompanied her on that melancholy return ride. He had put himself to a more refined martyrdom, indeed, by devoting himself to the service of Tregaskiss, who for days could not be induced to leave Ning's grave. It was the bereaved father who erected the sapling fence round the tiny mound, and with his own hands hewed the wooden cross that marked where the child's head lay.

Geneste knew that probably Clare would be very ill now that the strain she had been undergoing was relaxed, and arranged with Mrs. Hilditch, and with Blanchard, who had

learned something of doctoring in his ministrations among the poor, and his out-station and diggings life, what to do in the event of the crisis he dreaded, settling that they were to send for him in case of serious emergency. But Gladys Hilditch was aware of what had passed in his last interview with Clare, and determined within herself that rather than expose her friend to the danger of being nursed by Geneste, she would call in the doctor from Port Victoria. For this, however, there was no need. Clare reached Mount Wombo in a state of exhaustion, which was perhaps a merciful palliative of her mental pain. She lay for days, helpless as a baby, the slightest exertion bringing on a fainting fit and period of unconsciousness, from which she emerged in a half stupefied condition, in which she noticed nothing, but apparently in no actual danger.

Geneste had warned Gladys against the probability of these attacks, and had given her instructions, and provided her with restoratives, while a black boy in his employ kept up constant communication between the two stations, so that he was always informed of Mrs. Tregaskiss' state.

They had been back a week before Tregaskiss returned. He did not say where he had been or what he had been doing. Certainly some great moral change had taken place in him—a change which showed itself also in his physical aspect. His face had sharpened, and so looked more refined, his eyes were clearer, and his manner had lost the boisterous brag which had made it objectionable. He was irritable, intensely irritable, but this was a different sort of irritability. Outside, he found fault with the men, swore at the black boys even more than of old, and denounced the drought and the travelling mobs with all his former virulence ; but in the house, he was curiously subdued, would fall into long fits of moody silence, even at meals, when he would forget to eat, and Gladys would sometimes see his eyes fixed upon the chair which had been Ning's, and which was now hidden away in an obscure

corner of the room; or he would sit smoking in the veranda for hours, never speaking, with head bent, and hands hanging listlessly, his whole attitude expressive of such deep dejection, that Gladys, much as she had disliked her host, felt her heart go out to him in pity. Sometimes the fits of silent smoking would alternate with fierce trampings up and down, the noise of which was the only thing that roused Clare from her condition of semi-stupor to some sign of sensibility. Indeed, the fall of his footsteps got upon her nerves so distressingly, that at last Gladys spoke to Tregaskiss, and begged him to desist.

He did not often go into his wife's room, though he asked continually about her, and he sent a pack-horse to Ilgandah for port wine and other invalid delicacies of which the store was deficient. That penuriousness in trifles which had been an unpleasant trait in his character was not now so noticeable, and the grudging of his wife's porter seemed oddly coincident with over-indulgence on his own part in "nips." Brandy is responsible for many a quirk and extravagance, and Philip drunk and Philip sober are always different individuals. Tregaskiss appeared to have manfully mastered his failing: it was evident that he had been thoroughly sincere when he declared to Gladys that he was a changed man. The sacrifice of Ning had not been without its fruit on the outward showing of things, which would seem to justify the propitiatory theory, and to prove that martyrdom, even when it might be considered useless, is the adjusting force in the great universal scale, balancing good and evil. From the time that he had dashed away the pannikin of brandy and water, Tregaskiss had never, to Gladys' knowledge, touched spirits. She saw that he missed it horribly, and was woman of the world enough to make allowance on this score, as well as on that of private grief, for his moody, ill-tempered ways. She wondered within herself whether he had made another renunciation likewise, and fancied that he must have done

so, for he never alluded to Miss Lawford, as he had before, in a sort of bravado, been in the habit of doing, and never spoke of visiting Brinda Plains. She half suspected that there had been a scene of final parting, and of heroic resolve on his side in the interim between Ning's death and his return to Mount Wombo. She found something tragically comic in the notion of poor Tregaskiss playing the chivalrous part. Truly, the fact was pathetic, if its workings were grotesque, that Tregaskiss and his wife, at total variance in nature and sympathies, should have been acted upon by the same cause to arrive at the same moral result.

After Gladys' remonstrance, Tregaskiss tried to work off some of his misery on the run. He began the muster which had been delayed in the first instance because the strike had called out the bush-workers, drovers included, and it was not safe to start fat cattle, and later in the hope of the drought breaking up. But day by day the sun rose and set in pitiless, brassy glare. The great plains grew browner and browner, and the water-holes were patches of mud. Even the wiry gidia trees seemed to droop and shrink for want of moisture. They were cutting young trees to feed the cows, and drawing water in buckets to give the beasts drink. More than one traveller was found in the bush, dead of thirst ; cattle and sheep perished in hundreds and thousands, and ruin was staring the poorer Leura squatters in the face.

It was a bad time for Tregaskiss, hampered as he was with debt. The bank had refused to carry him on longer, he must make a large sale or give up. The bank inspector had come and gone, while Clare was at her worst. Moved to pity, perhaps, by the desolation of the house, he had sent a hurried report and departed. Now they were waiting to know whether or not the station was to be wound up.

A torturing time it was, too, for a sick woman. The West in a rainy season is bad enough, the West in a drought is the Inferno. It was terrible to lie there under that

heated zinc roof, the blinding glare penetrating every crevice, and all the contrivances for darkening the room only excluding the gasped-for air. Everything the hand touched seemed to burn, metal scorched, the furniture and even the buggy wheels cracked and blistered, the white ants swarmed ; mosquitoes and flies were in myriads ; and insects and reptiles came forth—the poisonous red spider, and centipedes, and scorpions, a daily horror. Gladys sometimes marvelled that she herself lived through that time, but love is an immense sustainer, and Blanchard was now continually at Mount Wombo. Over all was the furnace-like heat and brooding stillness, only broken by dust storms following a gathering of futile clouds—an irony in that parched land. Gladys prayed with the fervour of a devotee for rain. And at last a thunder storm came. The running creek put them into comparatively good spirits. The musterers started out, and at sundown the cracking of whips and bellowing of cattle announced their return. But the muster was a failure : the branding fell short of what had been expected—the cattle were too weak to travel, and Tregaskiss sank again into irritable gloom. He had hardly been near his wife, and she had never asked for him. Both had the sense of an impending explanation, and both dreaded its coming. Now, one afternoon when he had got home earlier than usual from the run, he appeared on the upper veranda at the French window leading into her bedroom. She was up, sitting in a squatter's chair between the draught of two windows, dressed in a white dressing-gown, with deep black ribbons. The baby was playing on the floor at her feet, while Claribel waited outside in the veranda, crooning an aboriginal song. The sound exasperated Tregaskiss—it was the wild duck ugal that Ning had been used to sing :

" Ya naia naringa.
Puanbu ni go
Mingo ahikarai
Whoogh ! "

"Stop that infernal howling!" he cried out. "How dare you sing that? Be off and take the child." He picked up the baby and handed it to the half-caste; the little thing cried, and Clare moved uneasily. Tregaskiss turned to her with a sort of apology. His manner to his wife now was curious—it was sullen, but always deprecating and half ashamed. "I'm sorry for the row," he said. "Those blacks' tunes drive me mad. Do you feel better, Clare?"

"I'm going to get up and go downstairs to the dining-room to-morrow," she answered. "I am much better, thank you. I'm afraid you have been very uncomfortable, Keith?"

"Oh, I don't know! Gladys Hilditch looks after things. She's a bit of a brick. By Jove! Blanchard's a lucky fellow. That engagement is a bad thing for us, though, she might have given us a helping hand."

Clare winced.

"Oh, I don't think so," she said vaguely.

"Where's old Cyrus Chance now?" asked Tregaskiss, with abruptness.

"I don't know if he has come back," she answered. "Jemmy Rodd told Gladys he was down South."

"There's been a boom over one of his mines, and I see that shipment of meat he made has all gone off well. He must be coining money—adding millions to millions, and what good is it to himself or anybody? I've been thinking," added Tregaskiss slowly, "that if his liking for you is worth anything, and for——" He paused, his face working. Clare knew what had passed through his mind, and made a quick gesture of expostulation. Cyrus Chance had always been fond of Ning. But to think of that fondness now as a marketable commodity choked her. "You don't suppose I meant that?" Tregaskiss cried, interpreting the gesture with a quicker intuition than she had given him credit for. He flung himself down upon a chair and leaned forward for a minute or two, his elbows on his knees and

his face buried in his hands. Presently he looked up. "It wouldn't go so much against the grain with me to ask the old miser anything now, that's all—because of—the Pickaninny. I know he had an eye on this station when I first took it up, and has been watching the market, and Cusack told me he'd said he would buy it at his own price. Well, I've been wondering if I could work a sale and fix up the bank. The worst of it is that Chance is such an infernal screw that he'd just wait till the bank was down upon me and then take it off their hands cheap."

"I don't know," said Clare dully. "Do you want to sell the station, Keith?"

He gave a rough laugh.

"Wouldn't every man-jack of us on the Leura want to sell if we could find a market? A drought isn't exactly selling time. But that's Cyrus' way of making money—buying in hard times and selling in good ones. He can afford it. I'm in a tight place, as you know well enough, Clare, and if I can't do something the place will be sold over our heads, and we shall walk out with nothing. I've had notice from the bank—I didn't bother you, but I suppose you know that they sent a fellow inspecting? Now, I thought you might help me with old Cyrus—write a letter, ask him over here, or something that would give me a chance of breaking the ground. There's no use in my going over to him. He's such a queer fellow, he'd as likely as not, if he guessed my errand, send me to the huts."

"I'll think about it, Keith. I couldn't ask him to lend money—but this isn't the same thing."

"Very well. Jemmy Rodd will be passing by to-morrow." Tregaskiss got up as if he were going to leave her, but fidgetted about the room for a minute, then came back and again seated himself. "Clare, I've got something to say to you. Do you think you are strong enough to bear it?"

"Yes," she said faintly.

"Look here! We can't go on like this—strangers in one house. We're husband and wife still, when all's said and done, and we've got to rough it along, the two of us, somehow, even if you do hate me."

"I don't hate you, Keith. I am very sorry for having said those words, they were provoked."

"Yes, I know they were," he answered; "and I've repented my part toward provoking them—and humbly beg your pardon for it. I had been taking more than was good for me, Clare, that's the truth; and I was just mad that night with one thing and another. That's all past now. I didn't mean what I said, and I'm glad you didn't mean your words either."

"I had no right to say them, Keith. I was sorry for you, even then. I am very sorry for you now—sorry that you should be tied to a woman like me, when you might be so much happier with someone better suited to you. That's how I look at it."

"Well, we've got to rough it along together, somehow," he repeated. "And there's this to think of,"—Tregaskiss' voice got husky again: "The poor little Pickaninny belonged to both of us; and she was fond of her daddy. You might forgive me, Clare—for *her* sake."

"Oh, I forgive you—I forgive you utterly, if there's anything to forgive. But you don't know—it's I who ought to be forgiven."

"Yes, I suppose I know—partly. Things seem to have got clearer in my mind—they were all muddled before—since Pickaninny came to me that night. I asked Mrs. Hilditch to tell you. Did she?"

"Yes; she told me."

"I said I was a changed man, and it's true. You may have seen it—or perhaps Gladys Hilditch has told you that, too. I've not touched a drop of grog since that night; and I've made a solemn oath by the child's grave that I'll never touch it again. That was the root of it all. And it

turned you against me, and then I got mad, feeling I was a brute to you; and that you despised me. It wasn't that I didn't care for you, Clare. I've always been fond of you; and I've always respected you—you've always been such a lady."

Clare made an inarticulate murmur. The great blundering fellow went on:

"You are a different sort from women like that poor little Hetty Lawford. There was never anything really wrong there,—you must believe that,—though I was taken with her, and I'm fond of her still; and I made a fool of myself. But it's all done with. She cared for me a bit, poor little thing! I don't want to say a word of her that isn't good—she doesn't deserve it. I've seen her and told her that it's all over and done with, and I expect she'll end by marrying the old land commissioner. I've advised her to, and to get away from the Cusacks. We've all been on the wrong track, and it's time we took new bearings."

"Will you take me away?" she asked wildly. "If you can only sell the station, will you take me right away?"

"That's what I want. I'll take you to a cooler climate, and where you won't have such a rough life—even if we can but just scrape enough out of Mount Wombo to take a cottage South; on the Ubi, perhaps you'd like that. And we'll begin fresh. Will you agree to that, Clare, for the sake of the poor little dead Pickaninny?"

Then almost for the first time since Ning died, the woman's stony reserve gave way. She cried as if her heart were breaking, trying to get out words of self-reproach and of entreaty for forgiveness, trying to make him understand the agony of humiliation his trust in her caused her, half repulsing his efforts to soothe her, yet humbly grateful for the dog-like, tentative caresses which were all he dared give her. By and by she sobbed out: "Oh, Keith! if you knew, you wouldn't be like that! If you knew how bad I have been."

"I don't want to know," he answered stolidly. "I dare say you were led away—as I was myself. Of course I know Geneste was in love with you; but I know that nothing would have ever made you forget your dignity, Clare, and your duty as a wife and a mother."

"No!" she cried, pierced to the soul; "I can't let you think that of me, when it isn't true—when I am a wicked woman, whom God has punished for her sin. I had promised to go away," she said, in a very low voice. "I was determined to throw up everything. I meant to leave you forever—you and the children."

She sat like a criminal, with her head bent. She could not meet her husband's eyes, which she felt were fixed upon her. Yet there was a sense as of a load lifted when she had made her confession. She heard him utter a choking sound, as though he were trying to speak, but could not get out the words. There was a long silence. At last he said hoarsely: "You can go if you like, Clare. I have no right to keep you or to expect you to live with me. I've cared for you tremendously; and I do care for you still, though you may not believe it. I came in here, honestly meaning to beg your forgiveness, and to ask you to let us begin a new life. But if it's like that, and you'd rather go, I'll not say anything; and I'll get a divorce, and you can marry him. You can take the baby if you like. I don't care for her. I don't care for anything, now that Ning's gone. I don't care what becomes of me. I'd as soon as not go and cut my throat and be done with it."

She looked up at him in wonder, and a kind of awe. He was gazing straight out of the window, with an expression upon his face she had not believed it possible he could wear. She saw that he had not spoken in anger or resentment—that he meant what he said; and she began to wonder dimly, whether in truth there were depths in poor Tregaskiss' nature which she had never sounded.

"Well," he said at length, still not looking at her; "do you want to go?"

"No, Keith," she answered, in a clear, decided voice. "I am going to stay with you, and do my best to make up for what's gone by, if you'll let me."

After this scene with Tregaskiss, Clare began to get better and asked to get up. Presently she took up again the ordinary duties of her life, in a strange, silent, apathetic way, never alluding to her loss, and avoiding mention of Geneste. It made Gladys' heart ache to see how watchful she was of her baby, hardly allowing it with Claribel out of her sight, and how she attended to every little detail of housekeeping, getting up early to do her dairy work, making and mending, and giving out rations, as she had been used to do. Except that she never laughed, and that the smiling curve of her lips was set into an expression of exquisite agony, she did not seem very different from the still, reserved, sweet woman of a few months before.

"There's just this difference," said, in answer to the remark by Gladys, Helen Cusack, who had ridden over one day with Ambrose Blanchard; "she was alive before, and now the best part of her is dead."

Helen's eyes followed Mrs. Tregaskiss in wistful questioning, and with a certain awed wonder. Had the strongest thing in her really died with Ning? Did she still love Geneste?

They were sitting in the upper veranda, the evening before Helen went home again, when Clare, turning to her suddenly, said, for the first time mentioning Geneste's name:

"Do you ever see Dr. Geneste?"

Helen went red, though in the dimness of the veranda it was not noticeable, and hesitated as she answered: "Yes; he comes over sometimes."

"Why has he not gone to England?"

Helen faltered more. "I—don't know."

"Will you tell him," continued Clare quite calmly, "that I think he ought to go soon, unless he has made up his mind to marry and settle down on the Leura. He ought to marry, tell him, and have children and a real home. It is a great pity that he should waste his life as a bachelor, when he might make some good, sweet girl very happy, and be very happy himself. He ought to go home and take up his profession again. Please give him that message from me."

"Mrs. Tregaskiss," said Helen, "will you not see him and tell him that yourself?"

"No, my dear," she answered quietly, "I do not wish ever to see Dr. Geneste again—at any rate, not for a great many years. Tell him that, too, if you please; he will understand."

It was not very long after this that Jemmy Rodd brought Mrs. Tregaskiss two letters. The first she opened was from Geneste. It had no formal beginning or ending, and this was what he said.

"I am obeying you. You told me that you never wished to see my face again; you bade me place a barrier between us which neither could ever pass over. I have done so. I am going to marry Helen Cusack, and we shall shortly leave for England together. I am not worthy of her, but she knows everything and accepts me as I am—a man, no nobler, no truer, than many another man. She loves me far more than I deserve, and to me, she is so dear that it will be my best happiness to try and make her happy. Good-bye."

The second letter was from Cyrus Chance, and ran thus:

"My Dear Mistress Tregaskiss:

"I have just come from one of my sugar plantations, after being down on the Ubi, to learn, to my great aston-

ishment and grief, of the sad misfortune that has befallen you. I will say no words, for I was fond of the wee thing; and deeds will speak plainer, as you will learn. I got your letter about the station; and on that matter I will treat with your husband, for ladies are best left out of business. I like the place, and I'm disposed to go a small bit above the market value, which is next to nothing just now. But only a small bit, mind you, so don't let him think he can pile it on. A gift's a gift, and a deal's a deal. I have no opinion of him as a manager, or I would offer him the billet. If he'll take advice from me, he'll go South, and start as a stock and station agent, where his habit of blowing will come in useful. I hear he has given up nipping, and I'm glad of it, and hope he'll continue temperate. I have seen young Blanchard, and have heard a great deal from him about his own and other people's matters. The man is straight; and since Fair Ines had to make a fool of herself, and come down to be just like the rest of you, she might have done it worse; but she had better have stopped in Dreamland, which is where I shall always think of her.

"About yourself: I have watched you for a long time, and old man Chance saw deeper down below things than you have any idea. He saw into your heart, for all that he is a woman-hater, and never had a woman in the world that loved him, nor loved one himself, unless it's you, dear mistress, and my dream woman, Fair Ines. So I know that you have had a trouble eating your heart all the while; and I am sorry for you, and glad to know now that it has ended in the only right way it could end. You remember what I said to you a while ago: 'Nurse your babies, and turn them into blessings'? You've got your little one left, and though it will never be like the one God has taken,—for she was a rare and gracious creature,—she'll be something for you to love and cherish when all else has failed.

"And now I come to the deed I spoke of, which is just this: When I went home after that day that I saw you in

your pretty drawing room, furnished so cheaply and so comfortably, with the two babies by you, and Ning so sweet and pretty, I made a codicil to my will by which I left your Ning, that's gone, twenty thousand pounds, to be held by you in trust for her, if I died before she was of age, and to come to you, and afterward to the baby, if she died first. This day I have put that amount in the hands of trustees as a settlement upon yourself. The lawyers will put it all into proper words, and do the rest, and I wish you to consider it, not as a gift from me, but as your rightful inheritance from your dead child. You will find, placed quarterly to your credit at the Bank of Leichardt's Land, due interest for the same.

"God bless you, Mistress Tregaskiss, is the prayer of your friend and well-wisher,

"CYRUS CHANCE.

"P. S.—I suppose you know that Geneste is going to marry Helen Cusack, and young Gillespie has gone home South, looking awful down in the mouth."

THE END.

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